

## Chapter Nineteen

### L'OISEAU CHANTEUR

August 18, 1996

Harry loved the way that the Bonnie hugged the A328. The ride back from Edinburgh was a rush of winding curves, roller-coaster hills and sharp breaks. There was little need for him to mind the wet pavement, since the motorbike never actually touched it. He felt as though he had mastered riding at last, with a little help from Devlin Whitehorn's manual. He preferred keeping the Bonnie in very-low-level flight; it played well to his broom-riding instincts. He could easily manage a hundred in flight, even through the curves if no one was watching. When he was 'riding', the motorbike bucked and wobbled and slid just like the real thing.

The manual had been very helpful indeed. He had found, for example, that the saddlebags were fashioned from dragon hide. He could put magic-sensitive things like Muggle electronics in the bags, and carry them without risk of damage. He also found that he could change the colour and detailing to match his whim; he had immediately tweaked the red tank into proper Gryffindor crimson.

He found that he liked Edinburgh very much. It was big and noisy and busy, but felt accessible to him in a way that London did not. He had made the journey to and from St. Ebb five times now in eleven days. It was nice to be close to the city but still able to retreat from it, he had decided. One of his saddlebags was filled nearly to overflowing with compact discs. His purchases were a smorgasbord, rather like Sirius' album collection – pop, metal, jazz, classical. He'd even purchased a disc by Heather Magruder, the performer that Keith MacLeish had scheduled for the Daily Prophet party in September. She didn't seem to be terribly wrapped up in self-promotion – the case wasn't adorned with her picture, unlike nearly every other disc that he purchased. He felt a bit self-indulgent after a week and a half of spending; there had been a new compact disc player, clothes, books, artwork, and many gifts for friends. He'd arranged for Hermione's birthday present, and he hoped that she'd appreciate it. He'd watched three sunrises and a half-dozen sunsets, thrown some

pebbles from the cliffs, walked the beach, and thoroughly soaked up the newness of being on his own. On the main, he thought that Sirius would be pleased.

The other saddlebag was filled with groceries – things that Harry wanted but couldn't purchase from the little market in St. Ebb. He didn't need much, since he was only taking breakfast and snacks at the bothy. Mr. Granger had called him a 'foodie', he recalled. Perhaps that was true, because Harry had fallen hard for L'Oiseau Chanteur.

He came across it unexpectedly, in the way that true loves are often found. He was acquainting himself with St. Ebb, and tarried until early afternoon. Hungry and knackered, he stumbled into a small restaurant. A French-influenced restaurant in a Scottish fishing village – however ridden with holidaymakers that village might be – seemed unusual even to Harry, and he was very uncertain whether to give it a go. It was terribly busy, even at a quarter past two – a good sign, he had suspected – but a waitress took pity on him and seated him at a tiny table jammed into a nook that faced into the kitchen. A swarthy fellow with expensive-looking shoes thrust a menu at him and demanded an order. Harkening back to the carts in the London market, Harry closed the menu and asked for the most interesting thing that the kitchen served. The swarthy fellow – 'The Greek', everyone called him – told him that the most interesting things wouldn't be found on the menu.

The chef was a woman called Shona. Harry guessed that she might be a bit older than Bill Weasley, but he was a poor judge. She had dark hair pulled back in a braid, and powerful hands. She seldom smiled, and her eyes were hard – many members of the Order had eyes like that. She had quickly appraised him, and told him matter-of-factly what he would be eating. Her food was wonderful, he decided instantly.

Watching her work was a lesson in command, he decided. She was ruthless, and her language made him blush at first. She knew everything about everyone in her domain – likes, dislikes, boiling points, ambitions – and she played them, just as surely as Ginny played the violin. Most of the kitchen staff seemed fanatically loyal to her, and the waiters and waitresses appeared to love her or fear her

– either way, they did their best. He watched her push people right to the edge, and then offer something – praise, sympathy, instruction – which they needed in order to go on. The kitchen was a combat zone, Harry learned; knives blazed, plates flew, and it was hot as a boiling cauldron. It was only appropriate that the chef was a general, he thought – a general who had mastered every part of the work. Harry watched carefully, and he learned by watching.

He came back for the evening meal, which caused The Greek – the swarthy fellow who Harry had since decided was a manager of sorts, or a representative of the owner, or something like that – to raise an eyebrow. Harry drew a smile from him by the third evening meal, which was as rare as a unicorn if the staff were to be believed. He also fell into a very interesting dance beginning that evening, which caused him to return just as surely as the food.

Harry rated a good table, The Greek had decided. Harry's table was secluded, off to one side, but afforded him a clear view of both the kitchen and the whole of the seating area – the 'floor', they called it. He saw her peeking out from the kitchen, and recognised her immediately – longish dark hair, bright eyes, pleasant face. It was terribly obvious that she was trying not to be obvious, and he knew then that she was neither Auror nor Death Eater. I wondered what you were doing, he thought, and now I know. She disappeared from view, and returned wearing a server's apron and a nametag. She waited his table that night, and he enjoyed it. If he hadn't been able to sense the ebb and flow of her emotions, he wouldn't have known that she was covering any nervousness at all; she was, in fact, as nervous as he was. He wondered why her thoughts were so open to him, and worried that he might be accidentally intruding in her mind. He resolved to learn more about Legilimency, and he wondered if Dumbledore's drifting around the edges of his own mind was sometimes an accidental intrusion.

He came back for the midday meal the next day, and – to his surprise – so did she. As the days passed, it became easier for him to remain outside of her feelings and thoughts. She was obviously related to Shona in some way, though he hadn't yet summoned the nerve to enquire as to the specifics. He guessed that she was near his age, most likely a little older. He thought that Shona was probably too

young to be her mother, but he'd heard stories via Dudley of pregnancies at Smelting and among the Stonewall crowd. She possessed a softer version of Shona's features. She also possessed a similar irreverence, though not the same vocabulary. She had a Scottish accent, but it was a gentle lilt next to Shona's chain-saw burr. Her voice was strong and smooth; it was the kind of voice that easily carried, and she seemed self-conscious about it. Harry decided sometime during his fifth evening meal that he liked listening to her.

She wore a different nametag every day, and therefore used a different name. She hadn't asked Harry his name the first evening, and so he decided to play along once it was clear that a game was afoot. It was an integral part of the dance now. She would be Margaret – 'that's Your Highness to you', she insisted – and he became Philip. She was Merry, and he decided to be Chris. The previous day, she had been Lily. She took note of his surprise, he knew, though he hoped she hadn't seen flashes of anger or sadness – she didn't know what she'd done, of course, and he didn't want to hold it against her. It took him until the end of the first course to decide upon James. He hadn't yet used Harry, and he doubted that he had ever heard her real name. She had missed two of his meals, and he had missed her both times. He knew that he was surely a bit thick when it came to girls, but even he couldn't help but take notice that she only waited on one table – his table – while the other servers took several each.

At some point, one of the older waitresses had kindly explained to him that he left rather large gratuities. He felt it was easier in the evenings to simply leave a 50-pound note; he preferred to slip out when he was finished, and didn't want to trouble anyone for change. The Greek actually suggested that if Harry wanted to toss about large notes, he could pay for both meals of the day in the evening; this had caused quite a stir. The previous evening, he had peeked into the kitchen to see 'Lily' divide his entire gratuity amongst the kitchen staff; she didn't keep a pence.

He was determined that he would summon the courage to ask about that, among other things. He wondered what name she would choose for the day, and debated whether he should choose to be Harry. He wanted to know her name, and he didn't; he enjoyed whatever was

happening very much, and didn't care to do or say anything that might end it or even threaten it. He cleared the last curve of significance on the A328, and sped along the straightaway that took him to the turn for St. Ebb. There was most likely a table being held, and he didn't care to be late.

Everyone knew who he was, and the bartender let him in well before the start of the midday service. The Greek was nowhere to be seen; Eduardo, one of the kitchen staff, waved and pointed at the small table near the kitchen. Perhaps they're full today, he thought, and he made his way across the floor.

Shona addressed a huddle of servers in the kitchen. He knew that she was frustrated by the midday servers, who were a younger and less experienced lot than the evening servers. She berated a young woman who Harry hadn't seen before, because she didn't know what prosciutto was. Harry knew, but only because he'd bothered to pick up a good text on the culinary arts at a book shop he'd happened upon in Edinburgh.

"What effing good are yeh? Yeh cannae fool English knobdobbers without the details! Once more – it's Italian ham, with a light cure!" she hollered, slapping her own forehead. "I'll run the effing features good and slow, then!"

She spoke slowly, hanging on each syllable with obvious contempt. "The fish is baked halibut, with baby red potatoes, asparagus, tomatoes and leeks. The meat is roast capercailzie with port wine sauce and braised red cabbage. The soup is soupe de poisson with rouille. Any of you need 'rouille' explained – again? Pasta is farfalle with roasted vegetables, garlic, baby artichokes, basil and extra virgin olive oil, and the dessert is tarte Tatin. Questions?" She glowered at them, and no one dared open their mouth.

Shona ordered beneficently, "Taste everything, my little numpties. Stand ready by twelve. There are at least a dozen six-tops in the book." She peeked out into the house, and caught his eye.

He grinned. "The features sound good," he said. "I'll have a hard time choosing."

She shook her head. "Slumming, are yeh? Didn't The Greek give yeh Table Ten?"

Harry shrugged. "I didn't see him; Eduardo waved me over. All the action's back here, anyway." He smirked, and added, "Besides... I wouldn't want to be out there with all those English knobdobbers, now would I?"

Shona nearly smiled. "Yer exempt... for the moment." The Muggle papers in London and the news readers on the telly had gone on about 'the Scottish problem' all summer, and he could sense the unease. Harry knew that Shona had strong feelings about the holidaymakers who overran the area, and tended to agree with her; he'd seen some rather ugly behaviour along the High Street.

She turned to her station in the kitchen, and he turned to a book. Bill Weasley had sent him a charmed copy of *Mastery of the Sword* by Sun-Tzu as a belated birthday present; it appeared to Muggles as though it were *The Art of War*.

"Och, here's trouble," Shona called out. Harry peeked over the top of his book. She was there, and Shona awkwardly returned her light hug.

"Thought I'd pitch in a bit," the hugger offered, and added with a chuckle, "You've been prattling on about the day staff in your sleep."

Shona unpacked saucing spoons. "Yer startin' ta sound like the English, little bird. The bufties are rubbin' off on yeh."

The hugger – lacking a consistent name to remember, Harry simply thought of her as She – pulled back her dark hair, and efficiently twisted it into a knot. "Do you want the help, or not?"

"Not if yer covering one table," Shona growled; she turned and shot a pointed look at Harry, who dove behind his book.

She glared at Shona, and Shona sighed, "Fine – it's yer holiday." She stalked over to a supply rack, rifled through a bin, and held out a nametag. "Yer 'Madeleine' today," she spat, and added in a whisper

loud enough for Harry to hear, “He seems a decent one, but yeh don’t know him. Dinnae get caught with yer breeks down.”

‘Madeleine’ tied on a server’s apron. “Charming,” she deadpanned.

“Yer head’s full o’ mince,” Shona muttered disapprovingly.

“I’ll take Table Four,” ‘Madeleine’ said, gesturing to one of the six-tops, “and Table Twenty-Six, of course.” She smiled at Harry, who had already decided that he liked her smile very much.

The intercom buzzed and Shona picked up, annoyed.

“Telephone call for Chef,” the hostess’ voice crackled over the speaker.

Shona groused, “This had better be good! It’d better not be that baldy bastard with the purple hat – Digger, or whatever his effing name is! If it is, yeh tell him to go off and bugger the very first...”

There was a loud squelch, and the hostess cut her off. “It’s Bruce MacShane, about the tomatoes. He’s waiting on line one, Chef.”

She pushed the blinking red light, and screamed, “Crackin’ ta hear from yeh, MacShane! What kind of glue-sniffing subhuman trash yeh got working for you? I wouldn’t feed the tomatoes they trucked over to a boatload of... yer mental! They’re pure shite! I’ve got three effing greengrocers – three! It’s always you that BENDS ME OVER AND ... four crates, and yer talking some sense... NO! I dinnae need three greengrocers any more – I can call Tim right now... four hours? I need them for the first seating tonight! Two hours, and NO EFFING EXCUSES!” She jabbed at the light, and turned her full attention to the sauces.

Harry was still stuck on ‘purple hat’ and ‘Digger’. She couldn’t possibly mean Dedalus Diggle, he assured himself. It’s hard to imagine Diggle touching a telephone.

She stood before him, notepad in hand. “Good afternoon, sir. Apparently, my name is Madeleine,” she chuckled.

He smiled. He couldn't help himself, really. "Hello, Madeleine. I'm Harry."

She surveyed him carefully, and he had no idea what she was thinking. After her slow appraisal, she said definitively, "No question about it – you certainly are. In fact, I'd say you could use a trim – especially in the back."

Harry playfully scowled. "It's a boring name, I know, but I'm rather attached to it. So... what will I be having today?" he asked.

"You will be having the pasta feature," she answered immediately. "Two of Shona's meals per day, and you'll end up with a tyre 'round the middle unless you mind your choices."

Please, don't let another one start mothering me, Harry silently plead to any powers-that-be who might be looking on. He grumbled, "I run five miles a day. That should allow me the fish, I think."

She smiled approvingly. "You're a runner?"

He shrugged. "It's something I picked up this summer. I..." He stopped himself. The real reasons were completely out-of-bounds, he knew. "I need to stay fit," he tossed out.

"I've taken it up over the last year or so," she pouted. "It's boring, but... it was recommended to me."

An unseen, unknown force compelled him to respond, "Perhaps it would go better with some company?" He darted behind his menu before he finished the sentence, blushing furiously.

"Perhaps it would," she said, and left. He felt her uncertainty as clearly as his own, and quickly shifted his concentration to the menu in his hands. He wished that her mind was completely closed to him, but control in that area was up to him.

She returned fifteen minutes later with the pasta feature. As she set it before him, she said, "I typically go out around three. That way, I'm



sure to be back in time for..." She stopped, and her cheeks coloured slightly.

"Do you have a favourite route?" he asked quickly.

She regained her composure. "I prefer the single-track roads in the countryside. I usually avoid walking around the village. Why? Do you have a good spot?"

"I run on the beaches, south of here a few miles," he said. "There's an unbroken stretch that must be about a mile long."

Her right eyebrow rose slightly. "Down by the tower house?" she asked.

"South of it," he answered.

"That's.... private property, you know," she told him hesitantly.

He wrestled with his choices for an explanation. "I have permission to be there," he decided.

She crossed her arms. "I thought you said you ran five miles a day. It's five miles just to get there."

"You saw me riding, didn't you?" he asked.

Her eyes lowered, and she chewed on her lower lip. At length, she answered, "I did. That's why I noticed you. You looked... familiar."

Harry's curiosity was piqued yet again, but he was afraid to question her; he felt as though she might simply fade away if he did.

She said quickly, "Pick me up at three, at the far end of the High Street – by the chemist's shop." She walked purposefully into the kitchen, tossed aside her apron, and disappeared into the maelstrom of servers and runners and cooks.

Harry lingered over the pasta. He felt a bit dizzy. He wasn't quite certain what he was getting himself into, or why he was getting himself into it.

By a quarter to three, Harry was so flummoxed that he nearly forgot to enlarge both helmets before setting out from the bothy back to St. Ebb. He carefully tethered the second helmet to the back of the seat and – with a careful look around – slipped into low-level flight across the rolling promontory to the narrow lane that ran between the tower house and the carriageway.

She watched him glide down the High Street, from a bench next to the druggist. She wore black sweatpants, an oversized grey sweatshirt emblazoned “Indiana University”, and trainers that looked new and expensive. Her hair was pulled into a short ponytail that flowed out the back of a plain white baseball cap, and her eyes were hidden behind black sunglasses. He reached for the tethered helmet, and handed it to her. She dropped her baseball cap into one of his saddlebags, flipped on the helmet, and climbed onto the back of the motorbike in a businesslike manner that suggested this wasn't her first ride.

She was clearly in a hurry, and her unsettledness rubbed off on him. He found himself looking for Death Eaters, Aurors, Order members and other unwelcome faces. That was when he spotted the black Ford Anglia. The brim of a hat obscured the driver's face, and the front-seat passenger was leant over as though he were hiding something. It pulled off the kerb just as they passed, and it trailed too closely. Harry thought he saw flashes of white light directed toward them.

“We're being followed,” Harry said aloud, and she nearly lost her grip on him. She cursed, and he cringed – it was hard to keep track of all the things she wasn't supposed to know, he thought. “Erm... sorry – I didn't think to tell you about the radios in the helmets,” he offered by way of cover.

“Is it a black Anglia?” she asked.

“Did you see it pull out behind us?” he asked in turn.

"I didn't have to," she answered curtly. "They've been sniffing around for the last day or two."

Bloody hell! he thought. They're following her? Aloud, he settled for asking her, "Erm... should I lose them?"

"I was so hoping I wouldn't have to deal with this," she sighed. "It's probably too late, but if you can manage it...?"

Without hesitation, he said, "I can handle that. I hope you don't mind high speeds."

She replied just as he twisted the throttle hard. "Go as fast as you... YEEEEOOOWWW!" He took the curves faster than the Anglia could possibly manage, though not so fast as to arouse any immediate suspicions in her. The pursuers were nowhere to be seen by the time that Harry pulled onto Lissance Lane and gently ascended toward the tower house.

Harry felt her grip on him tighten. She asked him, "Are you... are you absolutely sure that it's all right to be here?"

"Yes, absolutely," he assured her. He rode up to the circle at the entry to the tower house, and stopped. "We'll need to walk from here." He had sought a way for them to ride to the cliffs without betraying the true nature of the Bonnie, and could think of none.

He tied the two helmets to the seat, and she retrieved her baseball cap. As they began to pick their way across the tall grasses, he caught her looking up at the parapets atop the tower. She crossed her arms tightly, as though she were cold. "I've never been up close before," she said ominously.

She was making him nervous, and Harry tried not to snap at her. "What do you mean by that? It's just a house – a big one, but just a house!"

She looked at him as though he had just arrived from another planet. "I've been away, but I was raised here – I know that you weren't. Trust me when I say that this is not just another house," she insisted.

Harry wasn't at all sure what he should ask about next – the mysterious pursuers, her reaction to the tower house, or perhaps her real name – so he settled for silence. She stopped at the rise that marked the beginning of the narrow path down the cliff face. "What's that, over there?" she asked, pointing south along the cliff line.

"Just a bothy," Harry answered. You passed the test – you must be a Muggle, he thought.

She squinted and hesitated. "Must've been a trick of the light," she concluded.

"What?" he asked.

She began to answer. "At first, it looked like it was... forget about it – it's silly."

"What did you see?" he pressed.

She frowned. "It looked like it was flickering or something, right? It had to be glare off the water, or something." He moved nearer to her, peered at the bothy, saw no sign of a flicker or a glare, and wondered.

She looked over the edge of the rise. "Looks like a good place for a run," she decided, and trotted onto the path.

She wasn't a natural runner. She held her arms too close to her sides, and looked uncomfortable though obviously committed to the effort. He wondered who had recommended that she run, and why. She's a puzzle, and I want to figure her out, he thought, which in turn made him think of Ron. He thought of the Burrow, and hoped that the Weasleys were recovering.

He considered asking one of the many questions in his mind, but the look of grim determination on her face caused him to hold back. She

was there to run, he recognised, and it wouldn't do for him to get in her way.

She was reticent to run past the northernmost stack, away from the tower. They went a few hundred yards before she insisted that they turn back. He still got in his five miles, though it took nine trips back and forth across his portion of the beach. She stayed with him doggedly; he slowed his usual pace a bit by way of accommodation, but wasn't shy about making her run hard. He didn't think that she would appreciate being coddled.

She stopped at the centre of the beach, equidistant from each stack, and turned to face the cliff. The face was nearly vertical there; the terrain softened from sheer rock to steep moss-covered hills on either side. She breathed hard for a while, and then slowly settled. She seemed to be listening for something.

"Do you hear that?" she asked.

Harry was still for a moment, and then shrugged. "I don't hear anything... well, there's the surf and a few birds. Beyond that, it's quiet."

She nodded brightly. "Exactly – you can scarcely hear the surf. It's as though the cliffs absorb sound. I think this would be a fantastic place to sing." She put her hands on her hips, and surveyed from left to right. "It's wonderful – it really is. I can see why you run here."

Harry smiled. "It grew on me very quickly," he said. "I'm glad you like it. So go ahead and sing, then."

Her eyes grew wide. "What... are you talking about?" she asked hesitantly.

"You said this would be a great place to sing," he explained. "Don't let me stop you."

She looked around nervously. "You're joking, right? What if someone heard me?"

“We have to be a mile from anyone,” Harry said. “Who would hear you? There’s me, and the birds.” Surprised by her expression, he added reassuringly, “I promise I won’t make fun. I mean, we all think we sound good in the shower – right?”

Her eyebrows climbed even higher, and she laughed nervously. “You... don’t have any idea who I am, do you?”

“Should I?” he asked honestly.

She began to smile. “I assumed that you were toying with me... well, you were toying with me... that is, we were toying with each other, and... you really don’t know who I am?”

“I assumed that you never actually used your real name, of course,” Harry admitted. “I didn’t use my name until this afternoon.”

“So you are Harry, then?” she asked, and faintly blushed. “Sorry – I shouldn’t have made fun. I thought we were still having our game.”

He grinned. “It was good fun, our game – wasn’t it?”

“It was fun. I haven’t had as much fun in a long, long time.” She extended her hand, and added, “I’m Heather, by the way.”

Harry took her hand. “Heather... Heather who sings... I’ve been invited to hear someone named Heather perform next month. Do you mean to say... are you telling me that’s you?” he asked.

She laughed. “I think there may be something to my pet theory, I think.”

“Which pet theory is that, exactly?” Harry asked dubiously.

“That you very recently fell to Earth,” Heather answered.

Harry’s brow furrowed and he pulled his hand free. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Heather rolled her eyes. "You're obviously well-to-do, but you've rarely eaten out –"

"Wha... what would make you... that's not true...erm...I mean, I've been in a few..." Harry spluttered.

Heather began, "Do I need to go over all the reasons why everyone knows that...?"

"That's not necessary," Harry cut her off sullenly. He was intensely curious to know what 'everyone' knew, but wasn't prepared for a list.

"Right, then – back to my theory," she continued. "You've seen little or nothing on the telly in at least the last five years, and I wonder if you've ever seen a movie. Trust me on that; it's amazing how much idle conversation revolves around the telly and the latest movie... I'm sorry, I'll stop."

"Why?" Harry muttered.

"You look uncomfortable," she said. "I wasn't trying for that. I just... I just wanted you to know why I think you're interesting."

Heather had reminded him eerily of Hermione until the last; Hermione would have pressed her point beyond the pale. She thinks I'm interesting, he thought, and he rather liked the idea. He watched her face, more boldly than he had managed before with a girl – except for Hermione, of course, who was an exception in so many ways.

She seemed uncomfortable with silence, or perhaps with his gaze. "The Greek thinks you're either an angel or a demon. He claims to have a wealth of experience with both. Shona... well, she isn't sure what to make of you."

Harry had answers to two of his big questions, at least implicitly. He chose to go after a third. "Can I ask what she is to you?"

"Who... you mean Shona?" Heather asked. When Harry nodded, she said, "It's a bit complicated."

“How complicated can it be?” Harry asked. “Is she your sister? Your cousin? Your aunt?”

“It’s complicated,” Heather frowned.

“Uncomplicate it for me, then,” Harry said with a grin.

She seemed disarmed. Her frown faded, but she sighed. “I was raised by a cousin who I thought was my aunt – Auntie Fiona. I was given her last name, in fact. I found out about Shona when I was ten, but by then I was already boarding with Madame Hartmann six months a year, and... anyhow... when Shona came back to Scotland, my cousin was all too happy for me to summer here. I’ve managed at least a month with her every summer since I was eleven.”

The questions mounted in Harry’s mind, but he stuck with Shona. “She’s your mother, then?” Harry confirmed.

“She gave birth to me,” Heather corrected him firmly. “I don’t call anyone my mother.”

Harry began, “I take it that your father...”

“Shona won’t talk about it,” Heather said. “I don’t think that I want to know.” She sat down cross-legged on the sand. “So... tell me about your happy family?”

Harry sat beside her and struggled to sort out the details that he could share; what remained was rather vague, he realised. He answered her with as little emotion as he could manage. “My parents were killed when I was a baby. My aunt and uncle took me in, but only because they had to do it... that’s as nicely as I can put it. I was sent to boarding school, and I spent as much of the summers away as I could.”

She didn’t tell him that she was sorry, she didn’t try to comfort him, she didn’t make excuses for his aunt and uncle – she just nodded, searched his face with sad eyes, and briefly set her hand atop his. He didn’t pull away.



“Did you make any friends, at this boarding school of yours?” she asked. He noticed her hands now, and how she moved them when she talked.

“A few,” Harry answered. “Ron and I have been tight since the first time we... well, since we first arrived at school, I suppose. Hermione has been my closest friend, to tell you the truth. There’s Ron’s sister, Ginny... and Neville... Luna, of course...”

“Luna? That’s an interesting name,” she said.

“She has an interesting father,” Harry chuckled.

“You’re fortunate to have a lot of friends,” Heather remarked. She sifted sand and pebbles in her hands. “I’ve been tutored privately since I was nine. Fiona couldn’t have known what it would be like – always around adults, studying and practising all day, working in the evening.” She sighed. “To hell with it – the truth is that she wouldn’t have cared even if she knew. I’ve been back here for about three weeks. That’s the longest I’ve been in one place for two years.”

“Who watches out for you, then?” Harry asked.

“I do,” Heather answered.

Harry said, “That’s not right. What about Shona?”

Heather snorted. “Shona went to the School of Hard Knocks, and she worships at the Hard Work Kirk. ‘No chef should be above pot-scrubbing,’ she says. She expects me to work hard, because I’m likely to have one shot. She’s right about that part, of course.”

“Are you doing what you want to do?” Harry asked.

Heather hesitated. “What a question!” she said. “It’s what I do, and it’s what I know. Sometimes... sometimes I want to just run, right? Just throw my passport and some money in a bag, and run for it – right through the Chunnel, and on to Italy, or Greece, or... you get the picture. Shona’s usually on my arse about practicing, and Julian’s been on the phone every day asking when I’ll be back to work, and

Madame Hartmann's crabbing about arrangements, and... anyway, it never ends. This summer's been grand, though. I told everyone to sod off until the end of August, and so far I've been able to hold the line."

"But you'll be back to work in September," Harry assumed.

Heather nodded. "People depend on me; I don't want to disappoint them. I do like the work, you know. I like being on a stage, and I do like singing and performing. I'm lucky enough to work with great musicians most of the time. I've done some songwriting lately, and I've picked up a few instruments along the way. I really like the business end of it as well, but everyone still thinks they should be able to take advantage."

"Why? Because you're young?" asked Harry.

Heather's expression darkened, and she fumed, "They see a teenager. They forget that I've been doing this for half my life. I'm more than ready to take charge of my own career. Another ten months, and I get to make the decisions for a change ... oh, my God! Hide me!"

Harry looked around the beach, and suddenly felt very exposed. He felt for the tip of his wand in his sleeve. "What? Hide you? Why? Where?"

"I told them I wouldn't be working this month – I told them!" she groaned.

Harry looked to the north, and saw two men walking onto the beach from behind the stack. "You work with them, then?"

"You could say that," Heather growled. "It's more like working for them, most of the time. Of course, dear Julian always knows best – after all, he has my best interests at heart. At least I know where Burke stands; he only has a job because I'm doing well, and he probably hates me for it."

Harry said ruefully, "I understand you better than you might think. You know, I think that we're both owed a decent summer holiday for a change." He stood, and added with certainty, "I'll take care of this."

She eyed him curiously. "How?"

"You might want to head in another direction," Harry suggested. "You're a bit conspicuous sitting here, right?"

She stood, brushed the sand from her sweatpants, and strolled slowly toward the cliff face. Harry walked confidently, almost aggressively, toward the two intruders.

The man on the left was tall and lanky, with long blond hair cascading to his shoulders. He wore a black shirt that looked expensive, casual pants, and boat shoes over bare feet. He tossed his hair back twice while Harry walked toward them; Harry thought he looked vain. The other man was shorter and older, with closely cropped greying hair. He wore a sport coat and slacks, and shoes that were completely unsuited for walking on a beach.

The tall man on the left flipped back his bangs and waved genially. "Hullo there! Smashing walk, isn't it?"

The shorter man grumbled, "Yeah, bloody great."

Harry had no desire for uninvited guests on his property to begin with, and the fact that Heather didn't seem to care for the two men sealed his mood. He clenched his jaw. "You're on my property," he said flatly.

"Sorry?" the tall man said.

"He said we're on his property," the shorter man said, with a note of exasperation in his voice.

"I heard him. I understood that this was MacLeish's beach," the tall man told Harry confidently.

Harry pointed at the stack behind them. "To there," he said. "Between the stacks, it's mine."

The tall man raised an eyebrow. "I see. Perhaps we should introduce ourselves. I'm Julian Sumner, and my associate is Burke Preston. We're associated with one of Mr. Keith MacLeish's recording concerns. And you are...?"

"The owner of this beach," Harry growled.

The older man quietly reminded his companion, "Wilton did say that the former owner of Mr. MacLeish's lands retained the adjacent property."

The tall man – Julian – appraised Harry. "She didn't warn us that the former owner might be unfriendly."

Burke, the older man, countered, "She did say that he valued his privacy, Julian... and it appears that we're interrupting, besides." He squinted. "You... look familiar."

Harry froze inside for a moment, and then blustered, "I doubt we run in the same circles."

Julian saw Heather's back in the distance and winced. "Er, sorry. I failed to take notice, and... look, we really would appreciate being able to walk the entire beach –"

Burke cut in crossly, "He would. It'll require the better part of the evening to extract the sand from my shoes."

"Whoever told you that I value my privacy was correct," Harry said darkly. "No one is to come on this property without an invitation from me. I have taken some... interesting security measures." He hoped that he was successfully preying on their imaginations.

Burke quickly turned around. "Terribly sorry to bother you. We'll be heading back the way that we came."

Julian groused, "I understand the desire for privacy – believe me, I do – but there's no need to be so inhospitable!" He hesitated until Burke had moved several paces away, and then quickly dashed after him.

Harry waited until the two men rounded the stack, and then strode quickly toward Heather. He was more than a little satisfied with himself. "See? All taken care of," he called out.

Heather turned to face him, and she radiated barely-suppressed anger. "This is your property?" she asked accusingly.

Harry was taken aback. Instinctively, he snapped, "We were keeping a few secrets from one another – our names, for example? It hadn't occurred to me that I should detail my living arrangements, up to now."

"You live in that?" she demanded, inclining her head toward the top of the cliffs in the direction of the tower house. She was red-faced, and she clenched and unclenched her fists. He wondered if she had more of Shona's disposition than he had realised.

"I'm living in the bothy, actually. I haven't worked up the nerve to go in the tower yet," he admitted.

"Then you're a Black," she spat.

"My godfather was a Black," Harry said nervously. "It's complicated... he died, but I was... he... I suppose you could say that he adopted me, but he was already dead when... anyway, I ended up his heir, and inherited part of the estate."

She let her eyes bore into him for a while, and seemed to weigh his explanation. "Do you understand what else you've inherited?" she said icily.

He held up his hands in surrender. "Care to explain it to me?" he asked.

Her eyes were narrow and cold. "The Blacks bled these parts dry for centuries," she explained. "They owned nearly everything, and held sway over the rest. They used to collect assessments on most of the property in the village – like it was still some kind of medieval fiefdom or something. After they disappeared, some English came up and

tried to run the tower as an inn. People swore it was haunted. They didn't last. Most of the people in the village will tell you the whole place is cursed; they won't come near the place. Of course, you know what happened last month." She reached out and angrily shoved him. "I can't believe you! You send that little monster around to start everything all over again, and then you have the nerve to prance in here and get everyone to like you? How evil do you have to be...?"

Harry tried to calm himself, but failed. "What happened last month? What little monster? What are you talking about?" he shouted.

"Don't play dumb with me!" she shouted back. "I hate it when people play dumb with me! He works for you, for God's sake! The little freak wears nothing but purple... what's his name...?"

Harry closed his eyes. "Diggle," he said. "Dedalus Diggle."

"I knew it! He does work for you!" Heather had a wild look in her eyes.

Harry fell to his knees, and buried his head in his hands. "What was he thinking? Why can't anything ever be simple?" he muttered.

"Well? What do you have to say for yourself?" Heather demanded, and kicked sand at him.

Harry shielded his eyes, and waited for her to stop. He brushed sand from his hair, looked up at her, and said as calmly as he could manage, "You have no reason to trust me, but I'm going to ask you to try. I want you to tell me, as best you can, exactly what Diggle has done."

She stared at him for a long time. He tried to return her gaze, but something about it felt incredibly uncomfortable – like she was judging him. After a long time, she sat down with obvious reluctance. "You swear to me that you have no idea what's going on?" she snapped.

"I've only just received the inheritance," Harry explained. "Diggle would have been working on behalf of the Black Family Trust a month ago."

“Fine, then. This Diggle started collecting back assessments, on behalf of... on behalf of you, or this Trust you mentioned, or whomever,” Heather fumed. “I’ve seen the papers that he gave to Shona. He wanted ten years’ back assessments, with interest. Most people just rolled over and paid; even the idea that the Blacks had returned scared them into it. Shona wouldn’t let The Greek pay him. She wanted proof.”

“What kind of proof?” Harry asked.

“She wanted to see one of the Blacks, in the flesh,” answered Heather. “Diggle said that wouldn’t be possible, and threatened to evict her – to have the property seized! I... I stepped in, and told The Greek to pay him off and be done with it.”

Harry looked at her in surprise. “How did you manage that?”

Heather said, “He’s rough around the edges, but he really wants to succeed. I’m lucky to have happened on a good manager.”

“Excuse me?” said Harry, who was now quite confused.

“He works for me,” Heather explained. “Well, he works for the company that Burke set up on my behalf. I own L’Oiseau Chanteur, you see?” A look of concern spread across her face. “You won’t tell Shona, will you?” she asked.

Harry stammered in reply, “Erm... no, I won’t... I... er, I suppose that’s between you and... she doesn’t know? She really doesn’t know?”

“She worked in Edinburgh when I met her,” Heather said quietly. “She was sous chef for one of the large hotel and meeting concerns. She hated it. She never wanted to live in the city; that’s not why she came back to Scotland. When the money began to come in, after my first release, she refused to take anything from me. So it couldn’t be from me, get it? In comes The Greek, working for this faceless investor. She jumped at the chance to come back home. I wanted to do something for her... it just seemed right, you know?”

Harry found himself smiling, despite himself. "You're a good person, you know," he said earnestly.

Heather took a deep breath and asked hopefully, "You really didn't mean for this to happen, did you? I see that... in your eyes. Can you straighten it out, then?"

Harry looked deeply into her eyes. "I would never be part of anything like this," he said. "I'll fix it, somehow – I swear it."

The corners of her mouth turned up slightly. "I... believe you... but if you don't come through, I'll lock you in a closet with Shona and her cleavers."

Harry returned to the bothy after dropping Heather near the village; she felt it would be better to walk back alone. He examined each scrap of parchment that addressed his own finances and the Black Trust. He understood less than half of it, and his temples throbbed after four hours of slogging through endless detail. He understood enough to piece together part of what Diggle had done – he couldn't fathom why Diggle had done it, however.

He stepped outside the bothy, and called for Hedwig. She was unsettled by the peculiar wards, and preferred to perch on a rock outcropping that faced the door from a distance. She flew toward him hesitantly. He knew better than to bring her inside; he had done that once, and she had pecked at him mercilessly. He looked over his letter. It was brief and indirect; he had no way of knowing who might be seeing or screening his posts.

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Mr. Wolfe –

It's important that I see my conservator tonight. I've received some very disturbing information about trust arrangements, which must be addressed immediately. I'm certain that my conservator knows exactly where I can be found. Tell him that Barry White won't be singing tonight, even though I'm "Born to be Wild".



Mr. Black

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He figured that if Remus knew that the bothy had been a 'pad' and had spent time there, then he was certainly familiar with Sirius' album collection as well. He rolled up the parchment, and carefully tied it to Hedwig's leg.

"Hedwig, I need you to get this to Remus," he said, as he gently stroked her feathers. "It's very important that he get this tonight. Do you understand?"

She flapped her wings in acknowledgement, and raced southward. Harry watched her until she disappeared against the darkening sky, and then returned inside. He would repair whatever damage had been done, no matter the cost. He wouldn't have Heather or Shona or Hermione or Luna or anyone else think that he would ever condone what Diggle had done. He knew that Ron and Ginny and the rest of the Weasleys wouldn't be able to sleep at night if they knew. He punched the speed bag three times – hard – and thought of ways to make Dedalus Diggle squirm.

Harry spent the evening tidying up, reading, and listening to his new compact discs. He hesitated at listening to Heather's disc. He had no idea what it would be like; he only knew that she sang. For all he knew, it might sound like the Weird Sisters – although only the Bee Gees had come close to that, after nearly two weeks of listening to Sirius' record collection. He found Hermione's picture face down atop the armoire, and cursed himself for forgetting where it was. After the glass was cleaned and the frame dusted, he replaced it on the wall.

Hedwig impatiently tapped at the window just before midnight, and barely held still long enough for Harry to retrieve the envelope attached to her leg. She screeched and quickly retreated beyond the wards.

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Mr. Black –

You seem to share an old friend's taste in music. My concern has escalated in recent days. Your conservator has information regarding your trust arrangements, which should be shared in person. The conservator has solicited professional assistance. Please meet the conservator and his associate in the village tomorrow at one o'clock. He asks that you make suitable midday meal arrangements for three. I am told that you have developed a taste for French cuisine.

Fondly,

R. John Wolfe

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In the back of his mind, he had suspected that his minders had somehow followed him to St. Ebb. He wasn't comforted by Lupin's confirmation. He succumbed to a morbid interest in what Voldemort might be doing, and wondered whether he was hatching yet another plan. His scar hadn't even tingled for nearly two weeks. He sensed vague feelings of irritation or frustration, but nothing more.

Harry fetched another piece of parchment and his quill. The summer was coming to a close, and it was time to make good on a promise. He wrote an invitation to Ron.

## Chapter Twenty

### ON THE BEACH

August 19, 1996

St. Ebb, Scotland - 1:00 am

Harry ran faster and faster until his lungs seared and the salt air scorched his throat. He slowed to a walk, hands on hips and head hanging low, and took notice of the burning in his legs. He didn't know why he kept pushing; he simply pushed. He had run as far as the beach would take him – to the property that Diggle had apparently sold to Keith MacLeish, property that was covered by massive tents and large construction vehicles the likes of which Harry had never seen before – and then back and forth, over and over, a mile at a time. Time and distance didn't matter to him; it was all about the effort, the release of energy. Running drained him, but it brought no relief. The roadways of his mind still ran freely from one association to the next, and all dark roads led back to Voldemort. He wondered what the healers at St. Mungo's would say about the sanity of wizards who ran in the night.

He sat on the sand, and slipped off his trainers. Sand spilled from them, and he removed and vigorously shook his socks. An insistent breeze blew in from the sea, cool but comfortable. The retreating waters had revealed a rocky outcropping, and the stones glittered here and there in the pale moonlight. Leaving his trainers and sandy socks behind, Harry walked through ankle-deep water across mucky sand and onto the rocks.

The outcropping stretched for a good fifty feet before it faded into a jumble of jagged boulders and smooth stones awash in the surf. Harry watched the collision of earth and water, and was bewitched by it. He had dim memories of a day at the seaside cut short, typical of his few experiences in public with the Dursleys. In a mad fit, Uncle Vernon had packed all of them off in a questionable boat to a remote island upon the arrival of Harry's Hogwarts letter. That was the sum total of his exposure to the sea, prior to St. Ebb. The sight and the sound of it, the salty tang of the air, the cawing of the birds – it called

him for some reason that he didn't need to understand. The night sky had been his friend for a long time, but when combined with the siren call of the water... he began to understand his nighttime forays.

There was a light splash behind him, and then another, and then another – footsteps, he concluded. His wand was instantly in hand, and he was Disillusioned in the next instant. He turned to face the beach and nearly fell into the surf out of sheer surprise.

Albus Dumbledore wore a loose white cotton shirt that rippled in the breeze, tan pants rolled up to mid-calf, and a wide leather belt from which a leather pouch hung, with his hair pulled into a ponytail, and a shorter beard than Harry remembered. His bare feet splashed in the water and slurped in the sand. He looked directly at Harry, and smiled broadly. With a wave of Dumbledore's hand, the illusion that concealed Harry was lifted.

"I was beginning to wonder whether you would voluntarily end your run, or would continue until such time as you fell unconscious," Dumbledore said.

Harry pointed his wand and summoned a menacing look – it was difficult, as he was more inclined to gape at Dumbledore's clothing. "Tell me something that only the two of us would know," he demanded.

"At the Department of Mysteries, Voldemort possessed you, in the hopes that I would sacrifice you in order to destroy him," Dumbledore said calmly. "Of course, Voldemort would also be aware of that. Perhaps... ah, of course. You offered me Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans shortly after the recovery of the Philosopher's Stone. I rarely indulge, as I have a rather unfortunate history with them. On that particular occasion, alas, I selected earwax."

Harry lowered his wand. "I knew there were minders about, but I didn't expect to see you here," he grumbled.

Dumbledore walked to the edge of the outcropping. Surf collapsed against the rocks, and a fountain of spray and foam shot upward. He

laughed as the spray splattered him. "Did you hear what the surf said, Harry?"

Harry's brow furrowed, and he wondered if the healers at St. Mungo's might advance Dumbledore ahead of him in the queue. "I... er... wasn't aware that surf had anything to say," he managed.

"The surf said, 'I await your return'. It calls us home. When you reach a certain stage of life, the surf is quite easy to hear," Dumbledore explained. "That is one of the reasons why I spent many of my summer holidays at the seaside."

Harry was left even more confused by the explanation. "You're here on holiday, then?" he asked.

"I am many years removed from the luxury of extended holidays," Dumbledore answered. "When your destination became apparent, I personally took charge of your watch."

Harry stammered in surprise, "You... you've been my... my minder?"

Dumbledore chuckled. "I would point out that it is you, and not I, who has chosen to characterise the members of your protection detail as 'minders'. I have personally provided protection for a portion of each day since your arrival here. You keep rather difficult hours, even by the usual standards of young men, and you have been more mobile than I would have anticipated. I have deployed several others, in addition to myself."

"I'm sorry to have been a burden," Harry said with a tinge of bitterness.

"It has been a challenge, but not a burden," Dumbledore assured him. "Your excellent taste in dining has been a welcome surprise." He patted his stomach. "I shall have to expand the house-elves' repertoire. If I do not soon return to dining at Hogwarts, I shall have to expand my robes as well."

Harry felt a blush creeping into his cheeks. "You've been taking meals at L'Oiseau Chanteur?"

Dumbledore nodded. "I have been present for all but two of your meals there. The name of the restaurant is quite appropriate, is it not?"

Harry asked apprehensively, "What do you mean?" He had guessed that 'chanteur' had something to do with music, but hadn't bothered to enquire after the meaning of the name.

"Loosely translated to English, 'l'oiseau chanteur' is 'the songbird'," Dumbledore explained. "As I said, the name is quite appropriate."

Harry's cheeks grew still warmer. "Then you're aware of... erm... that is, you know who... erm..."

Dumbledore's eyes gave off their familiar twinkle. "I have been fully briefed by Tonks, who has conducted research on my behalf," he said. "I trust you understand that it was necessary for us to ascertain the young lady's identity, as well as that of other persons with whom you have associated."

Harry's focus remained fixed. "How much did you... that is to say, erm... what was heard, exactly?"

"Were things said of which I should be aware?" Dumbledore asked gravely.

"Look, I don't think that a small bit of privacy is out of bounds..." Harry began to bluster. He stopped when Dumbledore snorted.

Harry glared at him. "Are you enjoying this?"

Dumbledore thoughtfully stroked his beard. "I do believe that I am enjoying your consternation, Harry... quite so, in fact."

"I should toss you in the surf," Harry growled.

"You could certainly try to do so," offered Dumbledore; when Harry stood his ground, he added, "No? Perhaps I shall allow you the opportunity at another time."

“Are you going to tell me what you heard, then?” Harry asked with some anxiety.

Dumbledore smiled. “I overheard several days’ worth of delightful flirtation, Harry. It was rather unexpected on your part, at least to me. Were you concerned that I might disapprove of your behaviour?”

Harry shuffled his feet. “I... erm... well, I expected a lecture of some sort,” he muttered.

“I see. Very well... a lecture, you say? I shall give one to you, then,” promised Dumbledore. “In future, I would appreciate personal notification should you decide to decline my advice. This is particularly important when your whereabouts are at issue. It was terribly inconvenient to redeploy so many Order members. I have had to rely on Hogwarts faculty from time to time, a choice that you shall surely hear about. As for your new residence and current social life, I would ordinarily frown upon such close relations with unrelated Muggles on the part of a Hogwarts student. However, you are no longer a Hogwarts student. As an adult, you may keep your own counsel on matters of fraternization. I ask that you remain mindful of the secrecy rules and regulations. Juggling two divergent lives has vexed not a few wizards over the years; Sirius was one of them for a time. You should also remember that many other wizards and witches will not share my open-mindedness. Have I satisfied your requirements?”

Harry looked at the surf, the rocks, and the sky – anywhere but at Dumbledore. “Why you? You could have ordered someone else to spy on me.”

Dumbledore turned away from Harry and began to walk back toward the beach. As he picked his way across the rocks, he called out, “You made an assertion when we last met, Harry... an assertion that has remained in my mind since that time. You said that I did not know you. That statement, in part, led me to assume direct responsibility for your protection. Your assertion has proven true, to a point. You have grown up, in ways that I have not had occasion to appreciate. You are noble, charitable, trusting, quick-witted, and a host of other things

that serve you well. Do not misunderstand me and thereby presume that I consider you fully mature – you are too quick to anger, quite rash at times, and you lack the experience required as a foundation for good judgment. We must address the last part in earnest.”

Harry slowly walked along the edge of the outcropping, paying as much mind to the surf as to Dumbledore. The old wizard slowly eased himself down to the sand, and extended his feet toward the water.

“I have endeavoured to leave you to your time away, but there is news that should be shared – disturbing news, Harry. The first concerns Grimmauld Place. Have you shared the secret with anyone outside of the Order?” Dumbledore asked.

“No,” Harry said immediately. “I haven't even thought of it recently.”

“Our mutual friend Tom paid an unexpected visit, you see?” said Dumbledore.

Harry's eyes bugged. “Voldemort was at Grimmauld Place?”

“He left a message for you, two messages actually. One was written in ink, the other in blood. Your owl was gravely injured -”

“Hedwig!” Harry gasped. “Oh, no! Is she -?”

“She is in the excellent care of Madam Eeylops, and I am told that she will recover fully. No one else was present in the house at the time Tom made himself known, thankfully,” Dumbledore said.

“The dream...” Harry realised. “He got the location in the dream.”

“The dream? What sort of dream was this? I understood you to say that you had not felt any intrusions,” Dumbledore said with not a little alarm. Harry explained the circumstances of the dream with 'Sirius'; he went into more detail than was comfortable, but wanted Dumbledore to understand that he hadn't been the only one present.

The Headmaster stroked his beard in thought for a long minute. “I do not believe that Miss Weasley was the conduit, but I shall meet with



her – if nothing else, to allay her fears,” he said. “This was a most unusual visit, indeed. I must discuss this with a colleague, someone whom you have not yet met. Is this acceptable to you?”

“Yes,” Harry said, then added, “I’m not used to being asked.”

“Let us see if we cannot change that,” said Dumbledore. “I will return Hedwig to you for convalescence as soon as Madam Eeylops allows... and now I must convey the other news, and I ask that you keep your calm. There is a reason that I delayed in sharing this with you. Miss Granger took a disturbing turn for the worse not long after you left for Scotland.”

“WHAT?” Harry shouted. “WHY WASN’T I TOLD?”

“She is under excellent care, Harry, under the same colleague whom I mentioned previously,” insisted Dumbledore. “There were certain risks required for her benefit, and I felt it best to wait until there was positive news to share. Miss Granger is recovering nicely, and I have every reason to believe that she will be in attendance on the first of September.”

“I want to see her,” Harry said immediately.

“She needs time to heal,” Dumbledore said. “I am confident in speaking for Dr. Covelli when I say that it would be best for you to wait. In any case, the permission of Mr. and Mrs. Granger would be needed for you to visit, or in fact for me to provide any more information at all.”

“But she’s going to be all right?” Harry asked nervously.

“What happened to Miss Granger was a horrible thing,” said Dumbledore. “Are you the same person that you were before witnessing Mr. Diggory’s death and Voldemort’s rebirth?”

“No... I wish I’d not seen any of it, that none of it would ever have happened,” Harry said.

“So it will be with Miss Granger, I am certain,” explained Dumbledore. “She will eventually be well, but most likely changed in some ways. I say this not to frighten you, but to prepare you for the likelihood.”

Harry didn't want to talk about what had happened at the Grangers' home; he didn't even want to think on it. “I guess there are no worries about going back to Grimmauld Place, then. What's the Order going to do – meet at Hogwarts?”

“Given the climate within the Board and the Ministry, that would not be a wise course of action,” said Dumbledore. “We fear that one or more of the safe houses has been compromised, as well, by a different channel. Alastor has recommended that we adopt the cell structure that was used during the First War, and I agree. The larger meetings will be limited to those who coordinate cells and the general leadership.”

“Are there that many people in the Order?” Harry asked.

“We have engaged in careful growth,” Dumbledore said. “Though you will not be returning to Grimmauld Place, I do however ask that you resume training with Kingsley whilst you remain here. I have asked Tonks to provide some additional training, and she will be taking charge of your protection detail as well. I find myself drawn into an ever increasing number of meetings, which I consider to be bad for both body and mind. Alas, it is a consequence of the life I have chosen.”

“Kingsley and Tonks are fine with me,” Harry said.

“Excellent,” said Dumbledore. “Tonks?”

Tonks called out, “Wotcher, Harry!” inches from Harry's ear; he failed to hear so much as a pop! in advance. He shrieked, tottered to one side, and fell awkwardly from the rocks into the water. Pushing off against the bottom, he staggered to his feet just as a wave caught him from behind. He came up a second time, coughed and spluttered, and shouted, “TONKS!”

Tonks winced. "I know, I know... I'm a menace," she pouted. "Make your way over, and I'll help you back onto the rocks."

"I'll just head for the beach, thank you!" Harry snapped, just before another wave caused him to lose his footing. He spit salty water, and reconsidered; instead he swam toward the rocks. The current was stronger than he expected, and the water was bracing.

He stood chest-deep next to the rocks, and Tonks offered her hand. "I'll give a tug while you walk up the side," she said.

Harry took her hand, and a wicked impulse came upon him. He grinned at her, and pulled as hard as he could. He found her shrill shriek and thunderous splash most satisfying. She came up cursing coarsely and thrashing madly. From the beach, Dumbledore's laughter rang out in waves.

Tonks glared at Harry murderously. "I can't believe you... look at me!" Her hair had turned three different colours, and her face was a different skin tone and shape than when she first appeared on the rocks. "I suppose you think morphing is simple, then? Just a walk in the park, is it? Urgh!" She launched into another round of cursing, and Harry began edging toward the rocks.

Her expression grew feral, and she bellowed, "Do you have any idea how much effort it takes to set and hold a new face? What were you thinking? I am a high-maintenance woman!" She erupted into a splashing fit, arms swinging and feet kicking. Harry turned to avoid the flood of water flung toward him, and considered the potential cost of impulsiveness.

A second laugh echoed from the rocks; its tone suggested polite amusement. Kingsley Shacklebolt called out, "High maintenance, Tonks? This comes from a woman who considers Weird Sisters tee-shirts to be the height of fashion?"

"Don't interrupt, Kingsley; I've yet to reach a boil!" Tonks declared, before she resumed loudly cursing and splashing at Harry with all the strength she could muster.

Shacklebolt began to laugh again, and Harry protested, “This isn’t... glub... funny, Shacklebolt... grgl...she’s trying to... glrb... drown me!”

Shacklebolt looked back at Harry smugly. “From where I stand, it’s rather amusing.”

Harry splashed Tonks into temporary submission, turned back to face the rocks, pointed, and said, “Accio Shacklebolt!” The tall Auror stumbled, scrambled for balance, and then slid slowly and inexorably to the edge and into the water.

Harry turned back to Tonks. “Now that’s amusing,” he said, rather self-satisfied. She started to chuckle.

Shacklebolt broke the surface with clenched teeth. “Potter, you’ll pay for this. In a thousand small ways, you’ll pay,” he promised in a dead even tone.

Dumbledore strode back to the rocks. He flicked his wand, and Shacklebolt rose from the water. “Your deep sense of calm has long been a source of strength, Kingsley,” he said quietly. “You would do well to remember that.”

Shacklebolt bowed his head slightly, and muttered, “Of course, Albus.”

Dumbledore turned to Tonks and Harry with twinkling eyes. “Are you ready to come out now?” he asked.

Tonks nodded fervently. “The water’s on the brisk side,” she said. “Just one last thing...” Before Harry could fully react, Tonks closed the distance between them, planted her hand atop his head, and pushed. By the time he shot to the surface, she was standing on the rocks. She laughed so hard that tears streamed down her face.

Dumbledore lifted Harry from the water and cast a drying spell, smiling broadly all the while. “It does my heart good to see you acting your age – you have had precious few opportunities for that,” he said.

Shacklebolt also smiled, though faintly – a rare sight that summer, Harry thought. “It is too easy to forget that you’re sixteen,” he said. “I trust you’re prepared to resume our training?”

Harry felt the weight of obligation slip back onto his shoulders, and didn’t entirely care for it. “That’s right,” he responded.

Shacklebolt was impassive. “There must be sufficient space in the tower for practice,” he said.

Harry shrugged, “I have no idea. I haven’t been inside.”

Shacklebolt looked at Harry as if he were mad. “What are you on about? We know you’ve been staying here. Would you have us believe that you’re sleeping on the beach?”

Dumbledore asked, “Why haven’t you entered the tower, Harry?”

Harry hesitated before he answered, “It didn’t feel right.”

Dumbledore appeared to weigh the answer. Harry concentrated on building a mental wall around his own thoughts, but felt no intrusions. Eventually, Dumbledore said, “We will enter the tower together, tomorrow.”

Harry heard a voice from the darkness that he would as soon have forgotten. “Potter, it goes without saying that you lack any respect for your protectors. If you possessed the barest scintilla of respect, good sense or even common decency, then you would sleep from time to time,” sneered Severus Snape. Harry summoned cauldrons of boiling oil to the ramparts of his mental walls and silently dared Snape to advance.

“Severus, I have taken all the evenings with Harry thus far,” Dumbledore said. “Your complaint would seem to lack merit.”

Harry gasped when Snape came into view. The relative cleanliness of his hair was shocking enough; its sandy brown colour was nearly incomprehensible. He simply couldn’t process the sight of Severus Snape in casual Muggle clothing. Harry had never seen Snape wear

garments of any colour other than black. The combined effect of hair and clothing took decades from Snape's face; for the first time, Harry could imagine Snape as his parents' peer.

"Of course, Potter's new pet Muggle would have to be pathologically incapable of sleep as well," Snape grumbled. "Why would the world visit upon me another chronic rule-breaker who, in abject violation of reason, beguiles all comers and who is profoundly ungrateful for the gift of raw talent? The two of you are unpalatable peas in a pod, boy."

"Pet Muggle?" Harry asked dangerously, his fists balling.

"You will refrain from derogatory comments, Severus – is that understood?" commanded Dumbledore. "If you are here, then who is maintaining watch on the young lady's residence?"

"There was hardly a point, given that she is no longer within her residence," said Snape. "She is coming up the lane toward the tower as we speak. I suggest that we disperse."

Harry quickly shed his thoughts of Snape. "Up the lane... what would she be doing here at this time of night?" he wondered aloud.

"The same as you, Potter – destroying the lives of those around her via sleep deprivation," spat Snape.

"Your point has been amply made," Dumbledore said with pronounced impatience. "You may return to Hogwarts; thank you for your assistance." Snape glared at Harry. When Harry slowly started toward him, Snape stalked off into the darkness and disappeared.

Dumbledore turned to Tonks and Shacklebolt. "Eleven o'clock should be a sufficiently late start, wouldn't you say, Kingsley? Tonks, if you would be so kind as to check the perimeters?" Tonks playfully swatted at Harry's arm and disappeared in silence. Shacklebolt nodded respectfully and also disappeared.

Harry flexed his hands. "You can take the grease from the git..." he began to mutter.

"You shall have to overcome your enmity," Dumbledore gently chided him.

"Tell him that," Harry grumbled.

Dumbledore said calmly, "I have, and I shall do so again."

They walked across the beach in silence. Harry walked up the switchback to the top of the cliff. Dumbledore disappeared with a faint pop! and awaited Harry at the top.

"I suppose I'll see you in the morning," Harry said evenly.

Dumbledore nodded, and conjured an armchair and a light blanket.

"What are you doing?" Harry asked.

"I am making my arrangements for the remainder of the night," answered Dumbledore.

Harry hadn't contemplated the living conditions of his minders. "I'd invite you in, of course," he said hesitantly. "It's just... the place where I'm staying is warded against wizards. I could grant you permission, of course..."

"...But you would prefer to hold onto something that is truly your own," Dumbledore finished for him. "The bothy appears to have remained in excellent condition. I can certainly understand —"

Harry cut him off in a flash. "Appears to be... you can see it?"

Dumbledore lowered his eyes. "There is nothing to be gained by misleading you. Yes, I can see through the wards that Sirius placed on the bothy. In fact, I could see through them twenty years ago, when I followed Sirius and Remus and your father here. They are well placed; it was truly extraordinary work on the part of a sixth-year student. There are no more than a handful of wizards or witches who could visually penetrate such a ward. It is a unique ability that I have developed over time."

Harry asked, "You followed them here, when they slipped out of Hogwarts? Sirius didn't mention that in his letter."

"He would not have known, for I took no action," returned Dumbledore. "Sirius desperately required an outlet, and there was little that could be done within the confines of Hogwarts." Seemingly sensing what Harry was thinking, he added, "You have similar needs, Harry. I will not come to the bothy without your knowledge, and I will never knowingly disclose its location. You have my word." Harry satisfied himself with that, in part because he had no alternative. He led Dumbledore toward his home.

When Harry put his wand in the lead box, Dumbledore remarked, "How quaint," before following suit. Dumbledore was particularly interested in Sirius' record collection, and Harry's new collection of compact discs. He confessed to having charmed a Muggle phonograph so that it would function within his chambers at Hogwarts.

Harry showed him Sirius' stacks of photographs. Dumbledore identified a number of people in the magical photographs. Others were familiar, mostly members of the original Order. Dumbledore was at a loss with most of the Muggle photographs. Many had been taken in and around the bothy, or on the beach. Half were pictures of Sirius alone with women, sometimes one and sometimes more. A few faces recurred, but most did not. The rest were various combinations of Sirius and others – Harry's parents, Remus, and many who Harry didn't know; he thought that one face might have belonged to Devlin Whitehorn.

Harry felt compelled to guide Dumbledore on a tour of sorts – it felt like he was showing off his first flat. Dumbledore seemed to sense this and he bubbled on in a very positive vein. In the bedroom, his gaze paused on Hermione's picture.

"This is a fine photograph of Miss Granger," said Dumbledore. "From whom did you receive this?"

"Her father gave it to me... you know... afterward," Harry returned. Even thinking about that day made his blood rise; it was still easy to



summon images of Hermione's pain and of bloody Death Eaters strewn across the dining room.

"It is the only item you have placed on the walls," Dumbledore observed.

Harry was inclined to blurt out that he had no other frames, and no other pictures of his own. Something stopped him. He simply said, "It's a smashing picture of her, isn't it?"

"It captures her essence in that moment," Dumbledore allowed. "I am aware that you have owed Mr. Weasley. Have you been in contact with any of your other friends?"

"No," said Harry.

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow. "May I ask, why not?"

"This has been my time," Harry answered quickly. "I don't have to be the Boy-Who-Lived here."

"Do you believe that your friends see you solely through that lens?" asked Dumbledore.

Harry sighed and said, "It's what they know." He rooted through the wardrobe and pulled out a spare blanket, took a pillow from the bed, and trudged toward the living area.

"Thank you," said Dumbledore. "I may indulge in a short rest. I am certain that Alastor would not approve, of course."

"These are for me," Harry explained. "I'm not very tired. You can have the bedroom, if you like."

"Ah, of course. You might like to invite the young lady in," Dumbledore said. "I shall accept your kind offer. I have confidence that you will behave appropriately."

"I can't imagine why she would be out at this hour," Harry fumed. "She's trying to avoid the press, I think, and I'd think Shona would

explode if..." He stopped. "Wait... if she was already on the lane... that's been quite some time..." He snatched his wand from the box and said absently, "Excuse me," as he rushed out the door.

With a pang of dread in his stomach, Harry started up the worn path of grass toward the tower, wand extended. There was a bicycle laid down on its side where the path veered near the cliff's edge. He heard something, and stood as quietly as he could. It was the faint echo of a voice, coming from the beach. As soon as he reached the top of the switchback that led down to the sand, he smiled.

Heather was standing at the centre of the beach, singing toward the sheer cliff. Harry knew very little about music – he wasn't certain of exactly what he was hearing, in fact – but Sirius' record collection had greatly increased his appreciation. He knew with absolute certainty that he had never in his life heard a voice like the one that filled his beach with song.

He strained to understand the words, until it dawned on him that they were in a language other than English. Her voice soared and fell, from impossibly high down to mellow and throaty, from gentle trill to powerful roar. He disillusioned himself and quietly slipped down the path. He didn't stop until he was close enough to see her clearly in the moonlight.

She sang with her eyes closed, swaying from time to time, then wringing her hands, even twirling around once. Her face shone with emotion – no careful control, no hint of frustration, just unabashed joy. It must be like flying, he thought.

The song came to an end. She stood there with her eyes closed, and a satisfied smile spread across her face. I could cancel the spell, he thought. She wouldn't see, if I did it right now. He wanted to tell her that she was brilliant, that he was terribly impressed... and then it hit him. She doesn't want to be the Girl-Who-Sings. That's why she came home; that's why she's dodging the press and those two director-types. He wondered what she would think, if she understood how much they had in common – but there was no way she could ever know that. He understood that this was her time, free of pressure and free of her sort of minders, and he remained hidden.

She began to sing again, this time in English. Harry recognised the tune; he even knew that it was called the Coventry Carol. Church at Christmastime had been one of the few destinations where the Dursleys had gladly taken Harry; it had been an opportunity for them to appear charitable. He didn't recall the song having been sung, though – only played by the organist – so the words were unfamiliar. Heather sang the carol slowly, almost mournfully, and Harry felt the power of the words and the emotions surge through him. His urges were pitted against one another – on the one hand, he desperately wanted to reveal himself; on the other, he felt almost guilty for watching her – for intruding on something very personal. Now I understand why sirens are so dangerous, he thought.

After another song, again in a different language, she stopped and opened her eyes. She looked directly at him, but showed no sign of recognition. He realised that she was done, and dashed up the switchback ahead of her. She stopped at the top of the path, and stared at the bothy for nearly a minute before she picked up the bicycle. I could come out of the bothy, he thought; I could say that I heard something and came out for a look. He settled on following her home, to be sure that she arrived safely. He dashed to retrieve the Bonnie.

“Aaaahhh!” Heather shrieked, and then gasped, “Harry! Where in the bloody hell did you come from?”

Harry cursed himself for being completely thick – the moment he'd crossed the wards, the Disillusionment had been dampened. “Erm... I heard something and... I, uh... well, you certainly don't expect to hear anything out here in the night,” he stammered. “I thought I should have a look.”

She crossed her arms, and asked with a smirk, “What did you plan to do if you happened on an intruder – poke him to death?”

“Funny,” he said, before he realised that his wand was in his hand. His mouth went instantly dry, but he managed to say, “Er... forgot to set down my drumstick... that's it, erm, my drumstick... anyway, I'm

tougher than you might think.” He reached behind his back and awkwardly jammed the wand into his back pocket.

“You’re a drummer? Full of surprises, aren’t you?” Heather stopped, and relaxed her tone. “I didn’t mean to suggest that you couldn’t look after yourself. That’s not what I... I suppose what I’m trying to say is that I’m sorry. I should have asked you first, you know, before I came out here.” She worried her lower lip, and watched him expectantly.

“You were on the beach, then? Is that what I heard?” Harry asked, hoping that nothing in his voice betrayed him.

She looked away from him; he thought she seemed embarrassed. “I was right,” she said, “it’s a fantastic place to sing.”

“It’s yours,” Harry said impulsively, “anytime you like. Just tell me some time – I’d... erm, I’d like to really hear you.”

“I’d like that,” Heather said softly, and a smile crept onto her face.

Harry swallowed back growing nervousness. “It’s a long ride back,” he said. “If you like, you could leave the bicycle here and I’d give you a lift. I can get the bicycle back to you tomorrow.”

“I wouldn’t want to be a bother,” Heather said. “It looks as if you have a guest.” Harry turned. Dumbledore was standing next to the door of the bothy. Harry couldn’t make out his expression in the darkness.

Harry motioned to her. “Come on. I’ll just tell him I’m stepping out for a bit. It’s no bother at all – really.”

As Harry and Heather drew closer, Dumbledore appeared surprised for a moment, but quickly composed himself. He extended a hand to Heather. “I certainly did not anticipate visitors at this late hour,” he said. “I am Harry’s professor. My name is Albus, but I am typically called Al... for obvious reasons, I should think.” Harry averted his eyes from Dumbledore and turned away from Heather.

“You’re a professor? What do you teach?” Heather asked brightly.

Dumbledore smiled. "My chief interest is history," he said. "I direct my focus toward the Victorian era. I'm intimately familiar with that period. It almost seems as though I lived it." Harry broke into a mild coughing fit. Dumbledore looked at him with concern. "Are you all right, Harry? A sherbet lemon, perhaps?" Harry's coughing increased.

"I didn't realise that Harry was at the uni," Heather said. "Where are my manners? I'm sorry – I'm Heather Magruder."

Dumbledore slowly raised an eyebrow. "Would you be the same Heather Magruder who performed at the Prince's Trust concert last year?"

"Um... yes, I would," she said shyly.

"I was not in attendance, of course," Dumbledore said. "A... friend... who is more familiar with these sorts of things described to me the event and its aftermath."

"I... neglected to curtsy," Heather said, rather cautiously. "You'd think the world ended."

"I suspect that your unexpected decision to sing in Gaelic at the height of the Scottish referendum effort played a greater role in the public reaction," Dumbledore laughed. "I am most curious – was it your intention to send a message?"

"We've been made to neglect our heritage and asked to forget who we are for centuries," Heather said stridently. Harry noticed that the burr in her voice was suddenly more pronounced; she sounded rather like Shona, he thought. "It shouldn't require a wee song in our own tongue to make that point, sir."

Dumbledore held up his hands. "I have no position on the matter one way or the other," he offered. "I have dealt with sufficient politics for two lifetimes. It is simply fortunate that you were able to continue performing."

Heather snorted. "After that concert, my gates doubled and record sales quadrupled. Scandal sells."

Dumbledore turned to Harry. "Harry, I trust you did not suggest to Miss Magruder that you were studying at university?"

Harry snapped back to attention; his main hope to that point had been that he wouldn't pass out. "Uh... no, I didn't. The subject hadn't come up."

"I see. Harry has been educated in a small boarding school for the last several years, where I am a professor and the Headmaster. We are assembling a private tutorial for him for his remaining two years," Dumbledore explained.

"Two years..." Heather stopped, and she looked at Harry curiously. "Wait a minute – you're sixteen? You can't be sixteen! I mean, you're living on your own, and... and the motorbike... and... you're sixteen?"

Harry nodded mutely. So ends my summer holiday, he thought.

Dumbledore made a show of frowning, at first. "Harry has always been something of a rule breaker. I choose to tolerate the motorbike, as it was part of his recent inheritance and has considerable sentimental value. We all give him latitude, perhaps more than we should at times. However, he is an adult insofar as Scottish law is concerned. He has overcome a very difficult life, to become a gifted student and a good man."

"Why a tutorial? What are you studying?" Heather asked Harry.

Before Harry could begin to stutter his way through some kind of explanation, Dumbledore answered for him. "His tutorial is in a branch of physics, relating to the manipulation and quantum transfer of energy. It is quite obscure, but terribly important."

"Rich and brilliant – that's not really fair, is it?" Heather said. "Thank God you don't act the part. I'll have to get used to the idea that you're a year younger than me, though."

"You're... not angry with me?" Harry ventured.

“For being younger than I am?” Heather asked. “We weren’t exactly trading information, you know? Makes me rethink the lift home a bit, though.” Harry thought that she was serious until she rolled her eyes.

“Professor... erm... I thought that I would give Heather a lift back to the village,” Harry explained. “It’s rather late to be riding a bicycle.”

Dumbledore stroked his beard, and Harry’s mouth went dry. At length, he said, “Indeed it is, Harry. I suggest that you make haste. There are preparations to be made in the morning. It would be advisable that you get some sleep, however little that may be.”

Harry added in a mutter for Heather’s ears, “Remember the, uh, problem that I’m to resolve for Shona? The people that I need to help me are coming.”

Heather whispered in return, “I suppose she can set aside her cleavers, then.”

Dumbledore stepped inside the bothy for a moment, and then returned. “Perhaps we should keep the bicycle inside,” he said to Heather. “If you bring it to me, I shall set it aside for you. Harry can go around the back and fetch his motorbike.” He reached out to shake Harry’s hand, and said, “You will ride with care, I trust?” Harry felt the shrunken Bonnie slip into his hand.

“Absolutely, sir,” Harry promised. He dashed around the side of the bothy, and then ran to the edge of the wards before enlarging the motorbike. He rode it around to the head of the path, and waited there. He tried to imagine Heather’s reaction if he accidentally passed the wards and the Bonnie turned to wood; it was too horrible to contemplate.

Harry waited, and waited some more. After quite a while, Heather strolled toward him with two helmets in hand. He wondered how Dumbledore had pulled that off; they had been reduced inside his saddlebags, which were safely inside the lead box.

Heather smoothly slid onto the seat behind him, and clasped his sides with her hands. He struggled to put on his helmet - catching his

glasses twice in the process - and she laughed. That was enough to settle him. He left the Bonnie in riding mode, and purposely made the trip across the grassy field as rough as possible. She had surely seen and heard enough to justify some difficult questions, and he had no interest in adding to her prospective list.

"Your professor seems like a fine fellow," she said as they pulled onto the lane leading to the roadway. She seemed to have accepted that the helmets had radios in them, which was a relief to Harry.

"He has his moments," Harry said. His stomach fluttered, and his hands and arms tingled – likely from fatigue, he reckoned. As he turned onto the roadway and accelerated, Heather wrapped her arms around him and pulled close. It left him a bit short of breath, and he was certain that he needed sleep. Thankfully, she had nothing else to say; he doubted that he could readily speak.

As they rode through the quiet and empty village, Harry silently regretted the authenticity of the Bonnie in riding mode; the faux engine sounded like a jackhammer. Heather directed him to a ramshackle cottage on the edge of the village proper. She released him, and his breath returned somewhat.

Heather took off her helmet, and handed it to him. "Thanks for the ride," she said loudly enough to be heard over the idling Bonnie. "You'll get my bicycle to me, then?"

Harry nodded. "Tomorrow," he said.

Heather pointed at her ears. When Harry didn't respond, she reached out and took off his helmet. "I said, tomorrow," he repeated.

"Are you warm?" she asked. "Your face is red." Is she mocking me? he wondered.

"I'm fine," he answered.

Heather said, "Get some sleep." She leant in and casually kissed his cheek, to the accompaniment of the cottage's front door slamming open.



Shona pounced. "Where the hell have yeh been? It's past three o'clock in the morning!" she roared.

"Hello... I, uh... that is, she... erm..." stammered Harry.

Heather scowled. "I rode out of the village a fair distance. Harry found me and gave me a lift back."

"An' then yer arse fell off," Shona snapped. "Try another?"

"Heather found a spot on my land this afternoon where she thought she might like to sing. I didn't know she was coming back tonight. All she did was sing," Harry insisted.

"I told yeh not ta get caught with yer breeks down," Shona growled. "Get yerself inside - now. I set aside some stovies for yeh... suppose yeh worked up an appetite!"

Heather protested, but Shona roared and growled and frothed until Heather complied. She told Harry, "I'll see you soon," before a last snarl from Shona drove her through the door.

"Little chance of that," Shona muttered as she turned on Harry. "Found a spot on your land, did she? I've a good idea where yer land lies, yeh thievin' English bastard," she spat.

Harry reached his limit. He shouted, "Look, I don't know what you think you know, but you've no right to accuse Heather of doing anything other than sneaking out! I didn't know she was going to do it, and nothing happened between us! Do you think she'd have kissed me on the cheek otherwise?" Lights turned on in several neighbouring cottages, and someone shouted at them from a window. Shona responded to the shouting with a crude gesture.

"I needed her ta go inside. Now talk, if yeh know what's good for yeh," Shona demanded. "Where'd – yeh – get – this – BIKE?"

"It was a gift," Harry snarled back.

Shona winced with impatience, and then tried again with mock-sweetness that didn't become her. "It's a classic, yeh know? Who gave it to yeh, then?"

"I inherited it," Harry answered, an edge still in his voice.

Shona's eyes slowly widened, and the colour drained from her. "Inherited... like from a will? Like... when yer... dead?" she asked quietly. Harry nodded.

She squeezed her eyes closed, and breathed hard for a solid minute. She rubbed at her eyes, and it seemed to Harry like she was on the edge of sobbing. Her breathing steadied, and she clenched and unclenched her fists, over and over again. Harry had absolutely no idea what she was thinking, or what he should do; he settled on standing still. When she opened them again, her eyes were cold and empty.

She moved in on him until her face was inches from his. Her throat twitched and her chin quivered, and she wailed, "I know where yeh live, and I know what yeh are. Stay away from her, or so help me, I'll send yeh ta meet him. Go."

Harry started, "Who do you think I am? You don't know me..."

Shona erupted, "Are yeh tellin' me I won't find yeh in that little bothy down from the tower? Tell me she dinnae fall in love with the beach... that's the spot, innit? Yer just like him, yeh little bastard... yeh Blacks are all alike!"

Harry gripped the handles of the motorbike hard, and fixed Shona with a withering glare. "My name isn't Black," he said in a low, even voice.

Shona flopped to a seat on the kerb, and whispered anxiously to herself; Harry made out the word 'dead' several times. At length, she looked up at him – at first surprised and then angry.

“Why are yeh still here?” she screamed. “GO! Go as far as that effin’ bike will take yeh!” The neighbour again broke into angry shouts, and Shona stood and returned verbal fire curse-for-curse.

Harry slammed on his helmet, and streaked down the lane. When the lane unexpectedly turned into a darkened cul-de-sac, he quickly rendered himself and the Bonnie invisible and took to the skies. He shot out to sea, throttle wide open and low to the water, and waited for the act of flying to transport him somewhere else – somewhere without a past. The moment never came, and he turned west to race the lightening sky back to the bothy.

He thrust open the door, tossed the reduced Bonnie and his wand into the lead box, and unceremoniously dumped out Sirius’ box on the counter – all before he spotted Dumbledore seated on the small couch with a serene expression, and before it dawned on him that Heather’s voice was coming from the speakers.

“Would you please turn that off?” Harry grumbled.

Dumbledore looked at Harry curiously. “She possesses a remarkable talent,” he said as he stood and lowered the volume to zero. “Your trip into the village took considerably longer than I would have anticipated. Is there anything that you would care to tell me?”

Harry glared at Dumbledore, red-faced. “I’m sure the minders have already reported back,” he snapped, and then began to sift through Sirius’ Muggle photographs. She must be in here somewhere, he thought.

“Even members of the Order must sleep from time to time,” Dumbledore told him impassively. “I will ask again – is there anything that you would care to tell me?”

Harry flipped through the photographs quickly, looking for long dark hair and bright eyes. “She knew him,” Harry growled. “She knew Sirius...” He stopped cold. “Merlin... she must have known my dad, and maybe my mum...” he whispered, and tore through the photographs with a new urgency.

He scarcely noticed that Dumbledore moved to peer over his shoulder. "Who knew Sirius?" Dumbledore asked.

"Shona, Heather's... well, whatever she is to Heather," Harry answered impatiently. He flipped past a photograph, and then abruptly returned to it.

Sirius was on the beach, laughing – he was often laughing in the Muggle photographs, Harry had noticed. Harry's father was furiously brushing sand out of his hair, his mouth contorted into a snarl; his mother appeared to be sneaking up behind Sirius, with a small bucket in her hands. Remus was sitting off to one side – of course Remus was there, Harry thought. He was rolling his eyes at Sirius; Harry suspected he'd done quite a lot of that in those days. A dark-haired woman sat next to Remus, wide-eyed and pointing toward Lily. Harry peered closely at the image. It was slightly fuzzy, but he had no doubts – the woman was a thinner, sharper-faced version of Heather. He handed the photograph off to Dumbledore, and started through the stack again with a particular face in mind.

She was in several of the Muggle photographs, but never appearing with anyone consistently – here her arm was around Remus; there she and Lily wrangled an enormous umbrella; in one image she was with Sirius, James, the man who appeared to be Devlin Whitehorn, and another woman; in another she was free-climbing one of the stacks that bounded the beach, while Sirius, Remus and two other women cringed below.

More surprising to Harry, she was in the background of two of the magical photographs. In the first, Lily and Remus were playing what looked to be Muggle chess in the foreground, seated at a table in a kitchen that Harry didn't recognise. Shona was cooking; Sirius reached for something from a bowl on the counter, and she slapped his hand hard with a spatula. James was behind Sirius, and he laughed heartily each time that the spatula struck and Sirius scrambled backward. In the second, Sirius was mugging for the camera from a dizzying angle. He had a pack on his back, and a rugged Highlands vista behind him. Remus was on a path behind and below, clearly labouring; he gestured upward in a manner that could not be described as friendly. Shona was behind Remus; she glared

up at Sirius, and held a hand on the side of Remus' pack. It looked as though she was trying to prevent Remus from lurching over the side in exhaustion. The fourth face in the picture stopped Harry cold – it was Wormtail.

Dumbledore placed a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Harry, this woman obviously knew Sirius. Did she know that he was a wizard?"

"I don't know," returned Harry. "She told me that she knew where I lived and that she knew what I am. She thinks I'm a Black... Sirius' son, I suppose."

"By saying that she knew what you are, could she have been referring to membership in the Black family?" Dumbledore speculated aloud. "The Blacks had a prominent reputation amongst Muggles in this area for centuries."

"They have a reputation, all right!" Harry fumed. "Now I'm not to see Heather, and when Shona's through with me I probably won't be able to even walk down the High Street... and it's all thanks to Diggle!"

Dumbledore said, "Thus we return to your impending guests. Remus has expressed concern regarding Dedalus' handling of your funds and the Black trust." He sadly shook his head, and sighed. "What has Dedalus done now?"

"He's been collecting money all over the village, apparently," Harry told him. "Heather called the payments... what was it?... assessments. She said that the Blacks did this for years, and that it only stopped when they disappeared."

Dumbledore closed his eyes and frowned. "The Blacks were collecting relief. I am quite surprised that they were not subjected to legal proceedings. In feudal times, landowners paid relief to their lords in exchange for property inheritance rights. The right to collect relief still exists in a few places, but the right is a technicality that is almost never exercised. Dedalus reinstituted this?"

Harry nodded. "I don't know who he charged, or how much. Heather made it sound as though the restaurant could close over it."

"I understand why you are so displeased, Harry," said Dumbledore. "Unless this situation is resolved, it will become virtually impossible for you to remain here. Take heart in the fact that Remus has secured assistance befitting the circumstances. Mister Tonks and I have had a challenging relationship over the years, but I have always held his skills in the highest esteem. He will help you to identify the best possible solution."

Harry resisted the urge to crumple the magical photograph in his hand. He was tired, frustrated and angry, and it seemed reasonable to him that crumpling Wormtail would somehow help matters.

Dumbledore set the first Muggle photograph atop the counter. "We will discuss this particular situation with Remus as well," he said. "He will mostly likely know what, if anything, Sirius may have revealed. Bellatrix Lestrange has been an obvious security concern, given her familiarity with the area and the property. If we must also give consideration to Pettigrew, then we shall have to reconsider whether or not this location can be reasonably secured."

Harry closed his eyes tightly – he was trapped between fatigue and anger and frustration and couldn't move toward or away from any of them. "Wards? Charms? Another go at the Fidelius, maybe?"

"With the Burrow and Grimmauld Place out of order, those may represent the best of a less-than-ideal set of alternatives," admitted Dumbledore. "Are you hungry?"

"Hungry?"

"Yes, hungry – in need of food," repeated Dumbledore. "You have not eaten since the midday meal. Fellowe?"

A house-elf appeared abruptly in their midst, clad in a Hogwarts towel. Something about the elf suggested fastidiousness, though Harry was hard-pressed to put words to it. "May I help you, Headmaster?" Fellowe asked.

“Would you be so kind as to bring my young friend and I something light to eat – perhaps fruit, some breads and a spot of hot chocolate?” Dumbledore asked.

“Of course, Headmaster,” said Fellowe. “Will you be wanting the letter set aside for Mr. Potter?”

“An excellent thought – always a good Fellowe, aren't you?” said Dumbledore. “Please bring the letter as well.”

“As you wish, Headmaster,” the house-elf said. Within moments, he returned with the desired items, placed them at Harry's counter and left wordlessly.

Dumbledore picked up the letter, adjusted his pince-nez glasses and read, “To Harry James Potter, in care of Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry: from Griselda Marchbanks, Wizardry Examination Authority, Ministry of Magic, in regard to Ordinary Wizarding Level examination results.”

Harry instantly trained his eyes onto the plate of fruit. There was no reason to be nervous, he knew; now that he was dismissed from his formal studies, the results probably weren't as important. He hadn't felt the need to ask after his results, but couldn't completely push back his excitement at knowing.

He caught a quick look at Dumbledore, who peered through his small silver spectacles at the parchment in his hand. “Astronomy... Acceptable on the theoretical examination and Poor on the practical examination, but there is a notation... yes, of course – your practical examination was rather disrupted. All practical results were increased by one mark, which left you with an overall mark of Acceptable.”

Harry continued to look away because he was afraid that Dumbledore might see his shocked expression. Didn't see that one coming, he admitted to himself; I thought that I had failed theory as well.

“Care of Magical Creatures... Outstanding on the practical, with an overall mark of Exceeds Expectations,” Dumbledore said. “Charms...

Outstanding on the practical portion, and... Acceptable on the theoretical portion, for an overall mark of Exceeds Expectations."

Harry turned his focus to the breads as Dumbledore continued, "Defence Against the Dark Arts... Outstanding overall, with a Commendation awarded for performance on the practical. Well done, very well done." If there had been any of the examinations he was dead sure about, it had been the Defence practical.

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "Now, then... Divination... is best left unmentioned. Herbology... Acceptable on the theoretical examination, and Exceeds Expectations on the practical, for a mark of Exceeds Expectations. History of Magic... good heavens... it has been many years since I have seen an overall mark of Troll."

"Troll?" Harry groaned.

Dumbledore laughed loudly. "I see that students still believe such a mark actually exists! No, you were merely Dreadful. Moving on... ah, here it is – Potions... Acceptable on the theoretical examination, and Outstanding on the practical, for a mark of Exceeds Expectations."

"No wonder Snape was in a snit!" Harry smirked.

"Harry..." Dumbledore tut-tutted. "That leaves Transfiguration... Exceeds Expectations on the theoretical examination, and Outstanding on the practical, for a mark of Outstanding." He lowered the parchment and smiled. "Under any circumstance, this would have been a commendable result. Given last year's tribulations, it is remarkable. I offer my congratulations."

Harry quickly and efficiently ate; he could feel Dumbledore watching him, waiting for him to speak. When the last strawberry was gone, he mused, "I wonder how Ron did? I suppose he might be afraid to say; he'll probably figure I'll be upset, being dismissed and all. I'd guess that we scored about the same. As for Hermione, I'm sure she had the top marks... she always has... the top marks, you know..."

"Harry..." Dumbledore began.



"She's gone 'round the bend, hasn't she? That's what happened," Harry said flatly.

"That is a rather crude way to put it," said Dumbledore, "and she is well on the way to being recovered. Few people are as adept at handling trauma as you, Harry."

"Adept? I don't know what I'm doing; I just keep going on," Harry said.

Dumbledore sighed. "We appear to be locked into a circle, and there are some very difficult truths with which you must come to terms. I believe it is time for us to take a brief journey, one that I had planned for the first week of the term." He retrieved his wand from the lead box and transfigured his casual clothing into a dark raincoat over slacks and a formal shirt.

With a flick of the wrist, Dumbledore turned the letter into a second dark raincoat for Harry. "Coats may not be needed," he said, "but it is always best to anticipate the rain." He picked up a biro from the counter and waved his wand in a complex fashion. "Come – place your hand upon the portkey." The navel-tugging sensation began at the instant that Harry placed a finger on the biro.

\* \* \* \* \*

Normandy, France - 5:30 am

When he regained his footing, he and Dumbledore were standing beside a stone colonnade that opened to a reflecting pool. Under a three-quarter moon and slowly lightening skies, Harry looked beyond the pool toward a wide, grassy mall. It was covered with row after row of white markers. There were a handful of Muggles wandering about in the pre-dawn mist, but none paid them any mind. It was breezy, but reasonably warm; Harry draped the raincoat over his arm.

"Where are we?" Harry asked.

"We are in France," Dumbledore said quietly. He walked slowly and reverently along the end of the reflecting pool, turned, and headed down a long path that ran toward the sea. At the end of the path was

an overlook, perched on a jut of land atop a cliff. Below was a narrow and wide beach that divided the cliff and the sea. Dumbledore stared down at the sand with watery eyes.

Harry waited until a group of elderly Muggles passed, and then asked, "What's important about this beach?"

Dumbledore gestured at the beach below. "One year before Grindewald was defeated, thousands of men died here. Many of them are buried on the plains behind us."

"This is Normandy, isn't it? You're talking about D-Day," Harry said. "Last summer, I would sit in the corner of the television room beneath the Invisibility Cloak; there was nothing better to do. I found out that Uncle Vernon's dotty about the Second World War – if there was a programme on it, he was watching."

Dumbledore nodded sadly. "Tell me, do you feel it?" he asked.

"Feel what?" Harry wasn't sure what Dumbledore was talking about, but thought he should make an effort. He closed his eyes, and concentrated on the breeze blowing off the water, and then he felt it. "Pain... sadness... and something else. I don't understand – these were Muggles, right?"

"Powerful events leave powerful imprints – even Muggle events," Dumbledore said. "Sensible wizards avoid certain places in Germany and Japan entirely – it is simply too much to bear."

Harry tried to sort out the 'something else' that he felt. It seemed like a combination of things: fear, courage, resolve and death. He shuddered. "Why did we come here?" he asked in a whisper.

"Walk with me," Dumbledore commanded, and Harry followed him back along the path. They walked into the grass and into the midst of the sea of white marble markers. Most were crosses; a few were fashioned as six-pointed stars. There are so many, Harry thought. The raw feelings - the imprint of the place - grew stronger and stronger as they walked on.

“Once, I tried to count them all,” Dumbledore said, as though he had heard Harry’s thought. “I felt quite foolish later, when I happened upon the actual number engraved on a plaque.”

Harry shuddered again. “Please... why are we here?” he asked.

Dumbledore said nothing until they reached a circular stone structure amidst the markers. It was a chapel. Dumbledore paused at an inscription on the exterior:

These endured all and gave all that justice among nations might prevail and that mankind might enjoy freedom and inherit peace.

“We are here because this is where I come from time to time in order to contemplate war. There is nothing remotely like this place in our world – in the wizarding world,” Dumbledore said.

“Where are my parents buried?” Harry asked abruptly. His hands shook, and he wished that he could take back the question.

Dumbledore fixed upon him a look of regret so profound that Harry could scarcely bear it. “Harry, we do not bury our dead – we can not. I am sorry... it never occurred to me that you would not know this. When we talk of wizarding things, I too often fail to consider your circumstances.”

“What... what do you mean, we ‘can not’? I don’t...” Harry stopped himself. He thought of how Voldemort had used his own father’s bones. “Of course - a dark wizard could use the remains,” he muttered.

Dumbledore nodded gravely. “The most potent use of remains would be against the family of the deceased. We were very fortunate that Voldemort did not spirit away the bodies of your parents.”

“Is there a stone...? Is there anything?” Harry asked.

Dumbledore shook his head. “It is not our way. There was a sending – I insisted upon that. Your mother would have agreed with me.”

“A sending...” Harry murmured. He tried to remember where he’d heard that word before, and then it came to him. “Sirius said he didn’t want a sending.”

Dumbledore smiled faintly. “Your father would have agreed with Sirius, until your mother talked sense into him. It is an old custom, sending... one that should not have fallen out of favour. Very few remain who are trained in the art and practice of it.” He disappeared into his thoughts for a few moments, and then added, “I believe it would be a useful discipline for you to learn, even if the intricacies remain beyond your grasp. I shall think on that.” He sat down heavily on a low stone bench that backed the chapel wall.

Harry took a deep breath, and allowed himself to feel the pain in the air. “You haven’t really answered my question. Why are we here?” he asked again.

Dumbledore stared straight ahead. Harry thought that everything about the man seemed ancient at that moment. “You will lose people close to you, Harry. That is an inescapable part of war.”

“I know that,” Harry snapped.

“Do you?” Dumbledore asked. “In a century and a half, I have seen four Dark Lords come and go and now contend with a fifth, and I have lost more friends and colleagues than you could imagine. We may not have places like this, but the markers in my mind’s eye are as hard and as cold as marble. You will lose people close to you, Harry, and you will have to carry on. You will lose your resolve at some point, and you will have to carry on.”

“I get it – I’m the weapon. I know what I have to do,” Harry said coldly.

Dumbledore looked up at Harry, and his eyes blazed. “We know what must be done. Neither of us knows what you must do,” he snarled. “As for the rest, let me be clear: you are not a weapon.”

Harry was dismissive. “I have to kill him. That makes me a weapon.”

Dumbledore's voice remained low and powerful. He rumbled, "You have been marked by evil, and you are the one who can rid the world of that evil. If you were a weapon, then I would wield you. I would decide how to best put you to use, and train you for that and only that. When a weapon has satisfied its purpose, it is made ready for future use or discarded." He closed his eyes, and added gently, "You are not a weapon, Harry, not to me." He moved to stand, and Harry quickly extended an arm to help.

Dumbledore grasped Harry's arm and lurched to his feet. "There are so many shadows here, so many unrequited hopes and dreams. Voldemort would have found a bosom companion in Adolf Hitler; Grindewald and his followers were supportive of the Nazis, in fact. The people buried in this place were determined to stop Hitler; they believed that they were saving the Muggle world, and they died to that end. Tell me, Harry – do you think that the Muggle world was worth saving?"

"Of course it was!" Harry spluttered.

"Was it? Did the defeat of the Nazis put an end to Muggle atrocities?" Dumbledore asked.

"Well... no, but they couldn't very well surrender to Hitler. Can you imagine what the world would be like? I mean, it's far from perfect now, but..." Harry trailed off.

"Do you understand?" Dumbledore asked.

"The wizarding world isn't perfect, but the wizarding world under Voldemort would be a nightmare," Harry answered.

"If you save the wizarding world, then you will have the opportunity to shape it. Perhaps it will change, and perhaps it will not. If Voldemort prevails, he will not stop with the wizarding world. There would be no places like this, however – no one who cared would remain to commemorate the dead," Dumbledore said. "He will not prevail; you will defeat him. There will be losses along the way, but you will learn to bear them."

Harry began to protest. "But –"

Dumbledore waved him off. "You will learn to bear the losses, because there is no other choice. For five years, you have felt responsible for any harm that befell those close to you. Soon, it shall not matter whether wizards are close to you or far away. All that shall matter is whether they stand for or against Voldemort. Those that stand in opposition shall be in harm's way. If your friends choose to stand against Voldemort, then no one shall be able to completely assure their safety. Hogwarts remains a very safe place, but not perfectly so."

"What are you asking me to do?" Harry sighed.

Dumbledore's voice rose. "Stop pushing away those who care for you the most. You succeed in isolating yourself, and you gain nothing – no comfort for yourself and no added safety for others. Do not attempt to bear the burden of everyone's safety. You cannot offer such a guarantee, and the weight of this burden has left you sullen, angry and at times thoroughly unpleasant. If you are unable to break this pattern on your own, then I will intervene. Is that understood?"

"I know I can't protect everyone," Harry said, "but Ron... look, I'm worried that he'll do something completely mad, and... Hermione... I... I just can't stand not knowing, right?" His stomach lurched, and he felt himself begin to come undone.

"Harry, Miss Granger is in a safe place. She is surrounded by people who care for her," Dumbledore offered.

"You've said that already," Harry snapped.

"I do understand what you're feeling under these circumstances –" Dumbledore began.

"Hardly," scoffed Harry.

"I said that you could not imagine my losses. I have not always been alone," said Dumbledore. "One hundred and ten years has not been long enough to atone... or to forget."

Harry was caught completely flat-footed. "You were married, sir?"

"Yes," Dumbledore said.

Harry waited for more but it never came. Instead, they took the path back to the overlook and watched the beach in silence as the sun rose to their right. At long last, Dumbledore cleared his throat. "Severus was right in one respect: you do live a young man's schedule, Harry," he said; "I do hope I can have a kip on your sofa." He moved stiffly and Harry helped the Headmaster steady himself.

\* \* \* \* \*

For the first time he could recall, Harry landed on his feet at the end of a Portkey ride; it was Dumbledore who lurched to one side. As he had intended, Harry gave up his bed. He was so tired that he couldn't find rest, and settled for wandering until fatigue led him to sit down. Four hours later, Shacklebolt was shocked to find that Harry was indeed sleeping on the beach.

## Chapter Twenty-one

### DOWNSIDE UP

August 19, 1996

St. Ebb, Scotland - noontime

"Take your time, Harry," Dumbledore said, his voice calculated to reassure. Harry wasn't terribly interested in reassurance; he wasn't terribly interested in entering the tower at all.

Shacklebolt criticised, "You're letting your imagination run away with you – it's dictating your actions. Get hold of yourself."

Tonks stood beside Harry and gently put her arm around his shoulders; she touched him almost gingerly, as though she were afraid of hurting him. He was surprised by the gesture, and even more surprised by the pain in her eyes. "He's not here," she said quietly. "It's yours to take."

"I don't know if I want to take it," he admitted.

Her eyes flared and her hand tightened on his shoulder. From someone else, Harry might not have taken notice. Coming from Tonks, the power of the gesture lay in its unexpectedness. "Show him respect," she said harshly. "He gave this to you, so you'll take it."

Harry fumbled with the key and walked toward the black painted door that breached the wall. He thought of what he'd told Hermione – it seemed so long ago, he thought – Gryffindors go forward.

He said idly to the silver serpent knocker and the snakes carved into the stone trim, "This is mine now." Tonks abruptly pulled her arm from him; he understood why when the sibilance of Parseltongue echoed in his ears. He turned the key, and strode through the door and into a courtyard.

He walked around the outside of the tower first. Shacklebolt watched the turrets above, Dumbledore paused to look periodically at various



plants, and Tonks followed Harry at a distance. Inside the wall, the tower was surrounded by unkempt and overgrown gardens on part of three sides. In the back, where the wall began to follow the promontory downward toward the sea, there was a huge walk-through trellis, fully enclosed by winding vines and in the shape of a cross. A thick knot of trees filled out the remainder of the backside. Continuing around, Harry came upon a carriage house and then a stable, separated from the remainder of the yard by additional walls. The huge doors that led from the carriage house through the wall were concealed by thick brush – both inside and outside.

“I see why my mum liked it here,” Tonks said, just before she caught her toe on a raised flagstone and nearly fell atop Harry.

“How did you ever manage to become an Auror?” Harry laughed. Tonks’ face became McGonagall-stern; Harry winced, and added, “I know, I know – I’m a prat.”

Her expression softened slightly. “You’re not a prat, Harry,” she told him. “A thoughtless git, perhaps...?”

“Ouch,” he deadpanned.

They resumed their walk around the tower, with Tonks following more closely. As they neared the door that entered the tower itself, Tonks said casually, “When it matters, everything comes together. That’s why I survived Auror training. That... and Kingsley took pity on me at first, in his way.”

Dumbledore spotted Harry and Tonks waiting before the tower, and turned his attention away from the plants. Shacklebolt appeared next to the door. “I should have brought a broom,” he said. “Someone could be hiding behind the turrets or the parapets.”

“You’re spending too much time around Moody,” Tonks chided him.

“Are you ready to enter?” Dumbledore asked Harry.

Harry turned to Tonks. “This really should be yours,” he said.

Tonks shrugged. "I'm not a Black. I wasn't even raised as one; my mum saw to that. Besides, inheritance is arranged to favour men." With a smirk, she added, "Compensation for your shortcomings, I suppose."

Harry raised an eyebrow in mock-consternation and asked, "Was that a short joke?" He did his best to keep a straight face as Tonks squirmed.

She babbled, "I meant men generally... I wasn't... it wasn't about you... I would never... you're of perfectly normal height!" He snorted, and then laughed at her predicament. She swatted his arm, but smiled.

"What do you think - should we go in together?" he asked.

"The door's wide enough for one," Tonks returned. "Age before beauty, then." She stepped in front of Harry, wand extended.

"In that case, allow me," Shacklebolt offered, and eased Tonks aside. "Harry, you turn the key. I'll open the door." As Harry turned the key, Shacklebolt moved past him and into the darkness, wand extended and lit.

Harry peered in from behind. The door opened into a small irregular foyer. To the left, an opening appeared to lead into a spiral staircase. Ahead was a door. To the right, a hallway opened.

"Where are the sconces?" Shacklebolt wondered aloud.

Harry pushed in behind him, followed by Tonks, who advised, "Look up." Over the heads was a small chandelier formed of brass and glass.

Shacklebolt pointed his wand, and Tonks grabbed his arm. "No!" she insisted. "It's an electric light."

Shacklebolt frowned. "The Blacks used Muggle lighting? I find that hard to believe."

Harry found and flipped a switch on the wall, and the foyer was brilliantly lit. "Sirius' letter said that Muggles leased the place after his parents were gone. Heather told me they tried to turn it into an inn of some kind."

Shacklebolt's frown remained. "Calling her by first name, are you? Albus, I know you want to afford Harry more freedom, but surely you've had a talk about the dangers of familiarity with..."

Harry felt a ripple of rage, the first he could recall in days. "If you have a problem with my choices, then you talk to me," he warned.

Shacklebolt appeared ready to snap in return but stopped himself. Instead, he sighed, "I speak only out of concern. If you're insistent upon spending valuable time consorting, then it should be with your own kind —"

Harry cut him off. "What kind would that be?" he snarled.

Shacklebolt attempted to explain himself. "I wasn't trying to besmirch anyone. Consorting with Muggles takes so much more effort, Harry. There's the double life, of course — not to mention the lack of familiarity with customs and such. I don't expect you'll have the energy to waste, or the opportunity when you move back to Hogwarts in September."

Harry advanced on Shacklebolt, who took a step backward and gripped his wand. "Remember where I was raised? I'm a bit light on Muggle culture, but sometimes I'm lost around wizards. As for September, I don't plan to be trapped at Hogwarts."

"We have not yet decided where you will live in the fall," Dumbledore said from the doorway.

Harry whirled around, and glared. Anger seemed more painful now, he thought; it felt as though a half-healed wound had torn open. "We haven't, but I have," he growled. "Let's get on with this."

"Harry, we're just trying to help," Tonks offered.

“We’re trying to keep you alive,” clarified Shacklebolt.

“And we all know why you’re doing that,” Harry grumbled.

Tonks appeared stung, whilst Dumbledore looked on with evident disapproval. She blurted out, “I’ll start with the garret, then,” and dashed up the spiral stairs and out of view.

In short order, Harry decided that his fears about the tower might have been unfounded. The Muggles had extensively remodelled; anything reminiscent of the Black residence in London save the door knocker had long since been expunged. Dumbledore and Shacklebolt combed the first floor, looking for traps, boggarts, ghouls, and residual dark magic from the days of the Blacks. Harry chose to follow along casually. He felt no sense of foreboding, he felt no comfort; he felt nothing from the place at all. It was just a building to him. Home was a quarter-mile to the southeast.

The ground floor was taken up with a large area for eating and food preparation, adjacent to a long and narrow vaulted kitchen. One cellar held all the Muggle mechanicals – the laundry equipment, a walk-in freezer, huge water heaters, and the like. The other cellar was set as storage or pantry, and also contained a water closet. It had its own separate spiral stair. Harry split off from Dumbledore, and ascended.

The stair rose for two flights. The first flight opened into a great hall; the second to a loft that overlooked the hall. The high ceiling of the hall was boldly painted and patterned. A large dining table, with seating for twenty, dominated the centre of the hall. From the loft, he looked right to an ornate fireplace, straight ahead to a series of tapestries and an opening to another spiral stair, and left to tall windows that overlooked the sea. The loft itself was set as a sitting area, with settees and softly padded armchairs.

Harry descended to the hall itself. Atop the dining table was an envelope, with a small box adjacent. Harry’s name was written on the envelope in Dedalus Diggle’s florid strokes. He resisted the urge to shred the envelope and instead tore it open.

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Dear Mr. Potter: Per Mr. Black's instructions, I have engaged assistance to assure that the tower has been prepared for occupancy. This did require the contracting of Muggles with expertise in the repair and replacement of various machines. I suspect that they were overpaid. I do not understand why Mr. Black wished to have these Muggle features restored, as opposed to returning the tower to its prior condition. Nonetheless, I have carefully followed his instructions. The Lord of the manor's bedchamber has been prepared for your use. I have contacted a former caretaker of the property, to seek his services for instances when the property may be unoccupied. I shall contact you with more information on this matter forthwith. I was unable to enter or even find the Lord of the Manor's study. Mr. Black explained to me that this would be the case. Inside the box you will find the Black signet ring, per Mr. Black's request. Only the heir to the Black clan title may wear the ring; it will reject all others. According to Mr. Black, the ring will be required to gain entry into the study. It should be a straightforward matter for you to return the tower to its former state. I am happy to contract for house-elves, craft mages, or other servants who may assist you in that endeavour. All the resources that you will ever require are at your disposal, having been amply replaced in keeping with Mr. Black's desires. Acting on your behalf has been an honour and a pleasure beyond my wildest imagining. I may be reached by name via the Great Hall fireplace, at any time that you may require. Respectfully, Dedalus Diggle, Esq.

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Harry read the last paragraph several times. His eyes stuck on '... having been amply replaced in keeping with Mr. Black's desires'. Sirius wouldn't have asked Diggle to take money from Muggles, Harry assured himself. He pounded his fist against the table and let out a guttural shout.

Shacklebolt raced from the far staircase, wand at the ready. "What is it?" he boomed. He picked up the letter that Harry had flung, quickly read it and said, "Reached by name via the...? Why in Merlin's name...?" He lowered the letter, and shook his head. "It seems that Sirius' instructions have preempted those of the Order."

Harry growled, "I'm glad we're hooked up. Any time, he said? Smashing! How about now?" He pointed his wand at the huge fireplace, and green flames erupted. There was a small unobtrusive container of Floo powder set on the mantle amongst the bric-a-brac. Harry tossed a pinch, shouted "Dedalus Diggle!", and thrust his head into the fire.

"Oh!" Diggle squeaked. He was seated at an ancient desk that dwarfed him. "Mr. Potter, what an unexpected... please come in!" Once he truly looked at Harry, his anticipatory smile faded. "You look a fright! Is something the matter?"

Harry gritted his teeth. "I'm at the tower. I need you here now," he snapped.

"Of course, of course!" Diggle said brightly and he bounded from his chair. He gathered his valise and sauntered through the fire almost before Harry could back away.

Diggle pulled out his own brush, and expertly flicked the soot from his valise. "What is it that you need, Mr. Potter...? Oh! Hello, Kingsley... er... didn't anticipate seeing you here..."

"I didn't anticipate seeing anyone Floo into this tower," Shacklebolt glowered.

Diggle swallowed audibly. "Look here, Kingsley," he offered nervously; "I have an obligation to my late client, an obligation that I swore to fulfil. I'll have you know that it hasn't been easy. Sirius was a fine fellow – he didn't deserve anything that befell him – but he had absolutely no idea of the complexity involved in his requests. If I'd levied a typical percentage for my efforts, I'd be quite wealthy now."

He turned to Harry and went on proudly, "I didn't do that, however. I would have paid him for the opportunity to serve you, Mr. Potter. I owed your father a tremendous debt from days gone by, a debt that I feared I should never have opportunity to repay. I take solace in knowing that I have played a small part in assuring that his son shall want for nothing. You will never again have to grovel in the presence of those horrible Muggles."

Harry clenched and unclenched his fists. "Those horrible Muggles, as you call them, are my concern and not yours," he said. His voice gained power with each syllable.

Diggle looked at Harry and then Shackbolt uncertainly, and started, "I... I didn't mean to imply... er... that is..."

Dumbledore strode onto the loft that overlooked the hall. "Dedalus, what an unexpected surprise!" he said warmly; "How is it that you came to join us?"

"Mr. Potter... er... contacted me through the... erm... I can explain, you see..." stammered Diggle.

Dumbledore seemed to glide effortlessly down the stairs and across the hall, even as he chided Diggle, "It was decided that the tower would not be connected to the Floo Network, Dedalus. It was decided, and it was agreed upon by all present. I believe that you were present, were you not?" Diggle seemed to shrink before Harry's eyes. He squeaked about professional responsibility and sputtered about contractual obligations, and Dumbledore gazed at him impassively.

Harry turned to Dumbledore in frustration. "Who decided that? I certainly wasn't there, and this is my property. Now if you'll excuse me, Mr. Diggle and I have business to discuss," he snapped.

Dumbledore remained calm. "Would you not prefer to await Remus?" he asked. "As your conservator, he should be present. In addition, I understood that he possessed some information that might pertain to the matter at hand."

"I know everything that I need to know," Harry answered angrily.

"In the absence of Remus, perhaps I should remain," Dumbledore said.

Harry reached for the box containing the signet ring. "Mr. Diggle, we can continue our conversation in the study," he said forcefully as he opened the box.

Dumbledore placed his hand over the box. "Harry, I have conversed with Phineas Nigellus through the door to the study. You would deeply regret taking Dedalus into that room whilst in your present state of mind. If and when you choose to enter that room for the first time, you shall do so calmly. Please respect my opinion on this matter, if nothing else." Harry met his eyes, debated for a moment, and then closed the box.

Tonks bounded into the room from the main stairs. "I think they've arrived," she said with a smirk. "My dad should be in fine form. I hope Remus kept him from killing Odd."

"Mr. Lovegood? I thought Remus was bringing Mr. Tonks," Harry said.

"Oh, he did," said Dumbledore. "Mr. Tonks and Mr. Lovegood shared quarters at Hogwarts for seven years. Despite what I or others may think, Mr. Lovegood does bring valuable perspective from time to time."

"That doesn't explain why he's here," Harry said.

"I believe your friends wanted to see you," Dumbledore returned. "Miss Lovegood wished to convey her thanks, young Mr. Weasley wanted to answer his post in person, and Miss Weasley is... along for the ride, I believe the saying goes?"

"It was supposed to be Remus and one other person. I should have been told," Harry snapped.

"Yes, you should have been informed," admitted Dumbledore; "The matter slipped from my mind. There was rather a lot to go on about last evening – this morning, to be proper about it."

Before he followed Tonks to the front door, Harry glared at Diggle, and barked, "Sit!" From the corner of his eye, he saw Diggle comply.

A van was parked just outside the wall, like no van that Harry had ever seen plying the streets of Little Whinging. It appeared well kept, down to the blue and white paint, but the style was surely quite old. A



spare tyre projected from the front, centred beneath the square divided windshield. A chrome circle held the tyre in place, marked with an interlocking V and W. The top bubbled up, as though it could be raised. A huge white poodle was painted on each of the two side doors.

The two doors flung open, and Remus Lupin emerged. He was clad in his Muggle clothes – looking every inch a weary Oxford don – and his face was etched with horror and relief. “Harry!” he called out; “We’re here at last, thank Merlin!”

Harry clasped his hands. “I take it we’re to meet here, rather than L’Oiseau Chanteur?” he said curtly.

Lupin’s brow furrowed. “Look, Harry, I apologise for the extra guests. Quite a few people were anxious to see you. I hope...”

“You owe me a drink,” Ron called out, “and I could really use it right about now!” He coughed as he clambered from the back of the van.

Harry shook his hand, and sized him up. Ron looked as relaxed as Harry remembered him from years past. He wondered if Ron had permanently adopted Bill’s look, minus the earring and ponytail. “Good to see you, mate,” Harry offered.

“Good to be alive,” Ron laughed. Quietly and with a conspiratorial look, he added, “I’d have been bloody terrified if there were a van in my vision. Did you know that thing is actually burning when it moves?” Harry briefly considered an attempt to explain petrol but thought better of it. He was still uncomfortable with Ron’s casual acceptance of the visions of death.

“That drink will be butterbeer, Ron – butterbeer,” Bill Weasley warned, though in a friendly way. He turned to Harry, hand extended. “How are you, Harry? Tonks told me that you were faring well up here.”

“Another minder, I see?” Harry grunted.

“That’s right – Ron and Ginny’s minder,” Bill said with a frown.

Harry heard Ginny's voice from within the van. "Leave it," she said; "I'll carry everything in. You just concentrate on walking."

"I am not an invalid, Ginny. While it is true that I could feel better, I am perfectly capable of carrying my own bag," Luna protested.

Ron rolled his eyes. "Ginny's been taking a test run at being Mum," he explained. "She's rather good at it. I think that Luna's had her fill."

Harry winced. "Between Ginny and Hermione, I'd wager Luna hasn't had a moment of peace."

Ron's mouth tightened. "Harry... er... about Hermione - "

"Dumbledore already told me," Harry cut him off.

Odd Lovegood and Ted Tonks came around the side of the van. "For the last time, there are no such things as nargles!" Mr. Tonks spluttered.

Mr. Lovegood said kindly, "Ted, you're simply incapable of believing anything that you can't see. I'm sure that's a useful trait in your line of work, but... well, it leaves you a bit stiff. Not that that's necessarily bad, of course: being a bit stiff, that is. I mean, you always were that way. You wear it well, truly." It was obvious that Mr. Lovegood's tone was only leaving Mr. Tonks more exasperated; it was equally obvious that Mr. Lovegood either failed to notice or simply didn't care.

Lupin cut in. "Ted, Diggle's here," he said.

Mr. Tonks frowned and wondered aloud, "How on earth did that come about?" He shook Harry's hand and went on, "Pleased to see you, Harry, though I wish it were under more settled circumstances. I'm too often the bearer of unpleasant news; it's a professional hazard."

"I've already had my fill of bad news where Diggle's concerned," Harry grumbled. "I called him here so that I could sack him."

"It's a shame that Sirius didn't save you the trouble," Mr. Tonks said. "What's prompted you, specifically?"

“He’s been collecting money from the residents around here – some kind of assessment,” Harry explained. “He was doing it in my name, more or less.”

Mr. Tonks nodded. “Relief payments – they were an ugly practice a hundred years ago; they should be illegal now. I surmised something of the kind from the ledger entries. I’m really very pleased that Andromeda rejected our monies from the Black Trust.”

Lupin shook his head. “Diggle has quite a lot of explaining to do, Harry,” he said sadly. “What you’ve described is deplorable, but not the worst of it.”

Harry’s eyebrows rose. There was a tap on the back of his shoulder. He turned to face Luna, who was smiling at him. “I am pleased to see you, Harry,” she said. “This place must suit you; you appear rested. I do not believe that you have ever been well-rested, not in the time that I have known you.”

She wore denims and a high turtle-neck. Harry’s eyes drifted to the collar and then to Luna’s face. “How are you?” he asked

Her smile never dimmed. “Scars fade, given enough time,” she said. “I am not ashamed of mine. It is sensitive to the breeze, so I choose to cover it.”

“I’m sorry,” Harry mumbled. “You didn’t deserve any of this...” He wondered how she could possibly continue to smile. Ginny hovered in the background, and carefully watched Luna.

“This ground has already been trod,” Luna said. “Might we go inside? I would like to sit for a moment.” She’s so pale, he thought. Before he had an opportunity to offer any assistance, Ginny and Mr. Lovegood moved in and spirited Luna into the tower.

Ron shook his head. “Your own bloody tower,” he said.

“Yeah, I guess so,” Harry said glumly.

“Professor Lupin told us you had some business,” Ron said. “There must be some food around here. Meet up with you afterwards?”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” Harry called back absently.

Mr. Tonks reached into the van and pulled out a crate filled with papers. “Carry this, would you?” he asked Harry. He handed off a second crate to Lupin, and took two valises himself.

As they walked inside, Mr. Tonks advised Harry, “Before you do anything rash, Diggle needs to validate as much of this information as possible.”

Lupin added, “I’m very angry with Diggle, Harry, but we also need to consider his other recent work. He needs to remain on our side at the conclusion of this. Do you understand?”

Harry mulled this over. It made sense to him, when he thought about it – as a member of the Order, Diggle surely knew too much to be safely driven off. “I don’t like it, but I understand,” he answered.

Lupin entered the great hall just ahead of Harry. “Hello, Dedalus. We have so much to discuss that I hardly know where to begin,” he growled. He set the crate on the dining table and crossed his arms sternly. Harry set his crate next to the first.

“Hello, Ted,” Diggle said curtly as Mr. Tonks entered the room. “I take it you’ve hired him, Lupin?” Lupin’s glare provided an unmistakable answer.

“Good afternoon, Dedalus,” Mr. Tonks said crisply. “It would seem that you’ve really cocked things up this time. I have made a minor career of tidying up after you, but this is a corker. The fact that it concerns Harry, of all people, makes it that much worse.”

“No sense at all, Dedalus,” Lupin accused.

“Had I known that I would be walking into an inquisition, I might have prepared a few notes,” Diggle fumed.

“I doubt that it would make the slightest difference,” Lupin shot back.

Mr. Tonks leaned against the side of the dining table. “About three weeks ago, Remus asked if I would review the financial statements that Gringotts provided him. Frankly, it took a week to make any sense of them whatever. He and I, along with Amelia Bones, have put in another week or two evaluating your various decisions and have drawn some rather pointed conclusions. Let’s begin with the Black ancestral castle and properties, not to mention the ownership stake in the Daily Prophet. You must realise, of course, that you were completely taken by Keith MacLeish? You couldn’t possibly have evaluated comparable properties.”

“You make the castle sound like a hobby farm,” Diggle said defensively. “What comparable properties do you have in mind? In any case, ready currency was required. Mr. Black laid out a whole raft of requirements that were to be fulfilled prior to the reading of the will. There wasn’t time to wait for the perfect client. Do you honestly believe that people are lined up to purchase castles?”

Mr. Tonks insisted, “People are lined up to buy, Dedalus! With the boom in the Muggle economy and high interest in historical properties... for someone whose livelihood is dependent upon interchange with Muggles, you’re utterly blind to them!”

Diggle said through clenched teeth, “My livelihood is dependent upon assisting wizarding families forced to deal with Muggles, for whatever reasons that may arise.”

“So it was better to be grossly underpaid for the castle than to put it in the hands of a Muggle?” Mr. Tonks asked. “It is MacLeish, after all; many of our friends and colleagues no longer think of him as one of us, anyway.”

“Mr. Black wanted the castle liquidated. Can you imagine what would have happened if the castle itself had been divided into shares? Would you have preferred to share ownership of a castle with the Malfoy family? Perhaps I did undervalue the castle, but I was able to liquidate it in two weeks’ time, and MacLeish substantially

undervalued Harry's share of the Daily Prophet," Diggle said defiantly. "The escalation of that share value over time –"

Mr. Tonks cut him off. "You were misdirected – intentionally misdirected. He gave you a fair value on a modest investment, but managed to get your approval on a contract that you obviously failed to read, and received a castle and thousands of acres for pence on the pound! As icing on the cake, you moved all of it to Galleons in a single business day. The effect of a transaction of that size on the exchange rate probably cost a quarter of a million pounds!"

"As I said, ready currency was required..." Diggle repeated. He stopped, and looked up sharply. "What do you mean about failing to read the contract?"

"You gave MacLeish a limited license to use Harry's name and image," Mr. Tonks said. "The undervaluation of the investment was essentially payment for those rights."

Harry cut in. "My name and image... what do you mean?" he asked apprehensively.

"For the next two years, MacLeish owns limited rights to use your name and face," Mr. Tonks explained. "He's also asserted rights to the phrases 'The Boy-Who-Lived' and 'Bloody Harry'." Diggle winced, and Harry's eyes bore into him.

"You sold my name?" Harry snarled.

Mr. Tonks gestured for Harry to relax. "It sounds a bit worse than it is, Harry," he said. "For example, he hasn't the right to use your name as an endorsement for any product, although he can theoretically prevent you from making your own endorsements. When the rights lapse, you can refuse renewal of the agreement."

"This is unbelievable," Harry glowered.

"Mr. Potter, I apologise for my oversight," Diggle said hastily. "I had understood that the assignment of rights only related to promotion of your partnership in the Daily Prophet."

“Don’t refer to it as a partnership,” Mr. Tonks interjected. “Harry is a shareholder, not a partner. He has no decision-making authority, and no effective ability to oppose the decisions of management. After selling Harry fifteen percent, MacLeish still holds sixty-nine percent of Vox Populi.”

“MacLeish has consistently described Harry as a partner,” Diggle pointed out, “both privately and publicly.”

“MacLeish doesn’t have partners!” Mr. Tonks cried out. “If he’s painting Harry as a partner, it’s only because he gains something from it. How could you possibly put Harry in business with him? What were you thinking?”

“Keith MacLeish is a wealthy and powerful man. He is well connected in the wizarding world, and well respected by those who actually matter. His connections to our government are growing daily. It is to Harry’s benefit to have a relationship with someone like that,” Diggle insisted.

Lupin said acidly, “You could have applied that description to Lucius Malfoy until this summer.”

Diggle’s eyebrows shot up, and he said excitedly, “MacLeish is not a Death Eater. He is not a supporter of Voldemort simply because he is wealthy and powerful. I do not conduct business with Death Eaters.”

Mr. Tonks opened one of his valises, and removed a folder. “I see,” he said offhandedly. He flipped a few sheets inside the folder, adjusted his spectacles, and began, “You made a number of short term investments in June and July, with respect to the Black Trust. Two of them were in partnership with Global Ventures, Ltd... one on July 3 for a little less than a million pounds, supposedly repaid with interest on July 9... and another on July 10 for just over a million pounds, supposedly repaid with interest on August 2. You made three short-term investments in July with respect to Harry’s personal funds... one was with Global Ventures, on July 29 for just over a million pounds... supposedly repaid with interest last Wednesday. Was there anything suspicious about these particular transactions?”

Diggle crossed his arms. "I've used short term investments frequently in the past – and I know you have as well. Muggles are forever pinching their cash flow, and they'll pay dearly to get around that."

"Did you bother to check up on Global Ventures?" Mr. Tonks asked.

"It is a holding company for a shipping concern," Diggle answered dismissively. "I've worked with them a few times over the years. They borrow on liberal terms, and they pay off early."

"Global Ventures, Ltd. is owned by Echo Partners, Ltd., by way of about a dozen corporate shells and cul-de-sacs," Mr. Tonks said. "Exactly how many times have you worked with them?"

"Don't play the barrister with me, Ted – it's churlish," snapped Diggle.

"I suppose it's reasonable that you could have been fooled," Mr. Tonks sighed. "Andromeda spent the better part of two weeks chasing the ownership trail. I might have asked her to drop the search, but she began to run into familiar threads. Shortly after that, we happened upon Echo Partners, Ltd. Regrettably, we're quite familiar with that company. Are you familiar with Greco-Roman mythology? Given your name, I would have assumed –"

"What in Merlin's name are you playing at? Get to the point, would you?" Diggle demanded.

Mr. Tonks pressed on. "In mythology, Echo was a nymph. She was hopelessly in love with a beautiful youth by the name of Narcissus. Echo Partners, Ltd. has one owner, and you can surmise who he is."

Diggle's mouth slowly began to drop. "It's not possible," he said hoarsely.

Mr. Tonks delivered the deathblow. "One of the shell companies was called LXM Corporation. You wouldn't have had to dig nearly as deeply for that one, though I admit that it didn't strike me on first or even second viewing. L – X – M. Lucius – Xavier – Malfoy."



Diggle slumped in his chair; his face paled, and his breathing turned increasingly agonal. "Not possible... Malfoy... not possible... couldn't be... sweet Merlin, it's not... what have I done?" he cried.

"Dedalus, what you've done is to launder money for a Death Eater," Mr. Tonks said. He went on dispassionately, "On July 5, my dear brother-in-law successfully bought his way out of prison, using the money borrowed from the Black Trust. The repayment was made in marks, and drawn off an Albanian bank – you can imagine the provenance from there. On July 16, some very dangerous rune stones were stolen from a Muggle museum in Athens. It was a nice bit of thievery, I was told – quite expensive to pull off. One of the thieves was picked up by Greek magical law enforcement. He said that a tall British man with long blond hair financed the job, and he described the buyer of the runes as a British man with a metal hand. Again, the repayment to the Trust was in marks, drawn from a different Albanian bank. On two occasions, the Hogwarts Board of Governors issued adverse findings regarding Harry. The first action took place three days after the last Global Ventures investment. Both times, the same voting bloc supported the findings. Three of those members are now under a sealed enquiry. I have it on good authority that they're suspected of taking bribes that add up to an amount very close to that last investment of yours. That particular one was repaid directly from Lucius Malfoy's accounts; since his estate is again subject to impound by the Ministry, chances are good that Harry will have to return that money. When you put it all together, Dedalus, that's not a very good run ... not a very good run at all."

Harry stood frozen in horror. As Diggle cried out in frustration, Harry heard his own voice as if from a distance: "Let me get this straight... Lucius Malfoy borrowed my money to get me dismissed from Hogwarts?"

"That's the long and short of it, Harry. I'm terribly sorry," Mr. Tonks said. Harry laughed nervously, almost hysterically.

Diggle stammered, "M... M... Mister Potter, I... I don't know what to say. You can't... you can't believe that I'd willingly lend money to Lucius Malfoy?"

“What should Harry believe, then?” Lupin growled.

Diggle fumbled clumsily through his valise. “I admit, I made mistakes, but... I want you to take a look through this, Ted. Page through it, and then tell me what you’d do differently.” He pulled out a thick file and waved it frantically in Mr. Tonks’ direction. Diggle looked to Dumbledore, and Dumbledore returned the look impassively. Harry noticed that Tonks was watching her father with appreciation; he also thought that Bill Weasley was prepared to roast Diggle on a spit.

Mr. Tonks scanned the first page inside the file, flipped it aside, scanned the second page, and frowned deeply. He pulled a chair out from the dining table, sat, and spread the contents of the folder across the table. “This is unbelievable,” he muttered. Lupin peered over his shoulder, and then pulled up a chair of his own. Diggle began to take on the air of a man being vindicated. He glanced at Harry, and Harry glared back because everyone seemed to be missing the point.

After several minutes, Mr. Tonks looked up and concluded, “These are perhaps the most contradictory instructions I have ever read.”

“See?” Diggle trumpeted. “You see what I had to deal with?”

Mr. Tonks frowned deeply. “Yes, Dedalus, I see what you had to deal with. You were in over your head, as would any one man. You could have sought help on this. I would gladly have helped you if you’d asked. You could have pulled additional resources from Gringotts. Even Carlo Greengrass might have been helpful on the property matters. You could have done something. You were in over your head, and look what happened as a result!”

Harry reached his boiling point. “Mr. Diggle, why did you collect money from the people living in the village?” he asked.

Diggle failed to recognise the quaver in Harry’s voice. He answered, “In order to provide for the estate corpus that Mr. Black desired, while still satisfying his requests regarding personal property and inheritance, additional funds were required. I wasn’t about to obligate your personal funds, and I was not authorised to use funds from the

Potter Trust. The principal source of income for the Black Trust over the last two centuries has been recurring relief payments. I simply reinstituted a long-standing practice.”

Harry’s voice shook. “Did you ever think to ask what I might think about this?” From the corner of his eye, he saw Tonks and Bill Weasley edge closer.

“At the time I reinstituted the payments, you had not yet accepted the inheritance,” Diggle explained. “Mr. Potter – Harry – they owed you this. The Muggles owe you for your suffering... I’m sorry, are you feeling ill?”

Harry advanced on Diggle, who nearly knocked over his valise in fright. “The only Muggles who have treated me poorly are my own family, and they’re my problem. The people who live here have never done anything to me. How am I supposed to live here, when all of my neighbours hate me because I’m taking their money? Did you think about that?”

Diggle said hesitantly, “You make it sound as though you would be living here among them. As Lord of the manor, well, you live above them of course. Collecting relief payments on these lands is a perfectly legal –”

Harry stopped inches from Diggle, who looked into Harry’s eyes and clearly began to panic. “It may be legal,” Harry said, “but that doesn’t mean it’s right. No more – it’s done, do you hear?”

Diggle spluttered, “I... I’m... I’m sorry... I didn’t seek to offend you... I only wanted to...”

Harry ignored him. He said flatly, “Mr. Tonks, I’d very much like to hire you, and I figure I’d have Madam Bones’ blessing to do it. Mr. Diggle, as soon as you’ve answered every question that Mr. Tonks and Remus have for you – and I mean every question – I want you to leave. I have nothing else to say to you. If you’ll excuse me, please?” He picked up the small box from the dining table, pocketed it, and rushed blindly up the stairs.

It was right there, if I'd known to look, he thought as he sprinted upward. 'Tell Malfoy to continue his efforts' – that's what Voldemort said to Wormtail. Everyone said there were Galleons influencing the Board of Governors... I never would have believed that they were mine.

He heard Dumbledore call after him – something about avoiding the study. That's fine, he thought, I don't even know where it is. He simply wanted to find the highest point in the tower. At Hogwarts, at the times when everything had looked to be falling apart, Harry had scaled the Astronomy Tower or climbed atop the Owlery – anywhere, provided that it was high above the earth.

The stairs ended at the second floor, and a small passage led to another narrow stair that continued upward. He sat at its base and just breathed, and hoped for calm. I just hope that Remus and Mr. Tonks can straighten things out, he decided at length.

When he felt more settled, he took another narrow winding stair that ended at the garret. An open door to the left revealed a library. He wandered past the shelves, and saw many titles that he recognised from Grimmauld Place. To the right, a handful of steps led to a short corridor that in turn led to two bedrooms. Harry looked in the first; he sought a window that would accommodate him, or a service door that led to the roof. He heard voices in the second room and quietly peered inside.

Luna sat in an armchair, facing the window. Ginny fluffed a pillow and eased it behind Luna; "There, that's better," she murmured.

"My back is uninjured," Luna said dismissively, as though she were focussed on something outside.

Ron leaned against the wall. "She's just concerned, that's all. You shouldn't be travelling yet."

Luna turned to face Ron and said, "I lost a fair amount of blood, and thus I tire easily. My neck is sensitive and slightly sore. The bruises have subsided. None of these preclude me from travelling..." She

stopped and inclined her head toward Ginny, and added, "... or walking, or picking up after myself."

"I wonder where Harry's off to?" Ron said. "When all hell broke loose with Diggle, I thought he was running up here."

"Perhaps you should look for him, Ronald?" Luna offered. "I imagine he could use a friend at the moment." She added with a sigh, "He certainly has suffered this summer, has he not?"

"You've suffered," Ron returned. "Harry, he's just... I don't know... star-crossed, I suppose. This must be what that sodding prophecy is about – you know, the part about not being able to live."

"Ron, I don't think we should discuss it," Ginny warned.

"What is it with you?" Ron snapped. "You act like he doesn't exist any more... bloody hell, it was the snog, wasn't it? But that doesn't figure... you were the one that shoved him off, right?"

"It's nothing to do with that," Ginny said darkly. "Drop it."

"Ronald, you sound hungry," Luna said. She affected an ethereal tone, and intoned, "Treacle tarts are in ascension... and the tea leaves show a deadly penchant for pumpkin juice..."

Ron gave a mock shiver. "Urgh... you sound just like Trelawney – the old bat. Just don't do the thing, you know, that thing with the eyes that she... I asked you not to do that! Luna!"

Ginny laughed. "Can I get you anything, anything at all?" she asked Luna.

Luna shook her head. "Perhaps you should find somewhere to practice?" she suggested. "You haven't played since last evening; you must be longing for it."

"I did manage to get in a few minutes this morning, before we left," Ginny admitted nervously.

“Don’t encourage her!” Ron barked at Luna. “It’s torture, I tell you! She never stops!”

“Perhaps you could take up the lute, Ronald,” Luna said in a lilt, and then added in song, “You could serenade me, O good and gentle knight!”

Ron turned ashen. “You really are loony... you do know that, right?”

Luna turned back to whatever it was that she saw outside the window. “It pleases me to satisfy the expectations of others,” she said absently.

“She’s mental,” Ron said to Ginny. “Fancy a snack?”

Ginny picked up her violin case from the floor. “I think I’ll find a quiet spot instead.”

“There must be a suitable dungeon,” Ron grumbled.

Harry pressed himself into the corner as Ron and Ginny passed by. He didn’t want to be seen as an eavesdropper... like Ron, he thought. He waited for a few moments, and then knocked on the door frame. “May I come in?” he asked.

“You just missed Ronald and Ginny,” Luna said, without looking away from the window.

“I’ll catch up with them later,” said Harry. “It was nice of you to come along.”

“It is nice of you to tolerate uninvited guests,” Luna returned.

“Er... Luna... what are you looking at?” Harry asked, not entirely sure that he was prepared for a Luna Lovegood answer.

“Something absolutely fascinating,” Luna answered. “Come to the window.”

Harry crouched beside her, and she stuck her arm out the window. Her index finger pointed directly toward the bothy. “Look there,

adjacent to the cliffs.” She swirled her arm around, tracing a broad circle with her finger.

“Erm... what is it that I’m looking at?” Harry asked nervously.

“Look at that small pile of rocks, nearest to the cliffs,” Luna directed. “In which direction does the pile cast its shadow?”

Harry thought for a moment. “Let me see... northeast?”

“Yes, if the sea is directly east,” Luna said. “Look at the pile of rocks over there, away from the cliffs... no, not that one – the one farthest from us.”

“All right – I see it.”

“In which direction does the shadow point?”

Harry looked, and then looked again. “Southwest,” he whispered.

“Look at the rest of the piles of rock, Harry. All of the shadows appear to point away from the space bounded by the piles,” Luna observed.

“I’ll be switched... you’re right,” Harry said. “How did you see that... why did you see that?”

Luna smiled, and her big eyes shone. “My daddy prides himself on seeing the world clearly, and he taught that to me. Do you know what most of us do, when confronted with phenomena that break the rules? We see those phenomena through the lens of the rules, and thus we do not see them at all. I open my eyes, and I see. Muggles often think that the world is right side up. Wizards and witches know that it’s upside down. Unfortunately for them, it’s actually downside up.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “ ‘Downside up’ ?”

“Downside up,” Luna repeated. “I will borrow my daddy’s explanation, as I have been unable to improve upon it. Can you do a headstand?”

Harry froze. "I'm sorry?"

"A headstand – can you do a headstand?" Luna asked. "You can balance against the wall, provided that you are faced toward the centre of the room." She made no move to leave her chair.

Harry felt like a fool, and he hoped fervently that no one else entered the room. Still, he did as she asked. "Now what?" he asked uncomfortably.

"Look around. How would you describe your position?" she asked.

"I'm upside down!" he blurted in exasperation.

"Where is 'down'?" Luna asked calmly.

"Right here, for Merlin's sake!" he shouted, and banged his elbow against the floor.

"But that's 'up'... isn't it? Where is 'down'?" she asked.

"It's not 'up'..." Harry stopped. He looked straight ahead. The floor was above him, and the ceiling fell away at his feet. "Okay, it's 'up' at the moment. Is that your point?"

Luna slowly rose from the chair, and positioned herself in front of Harry. "Is it still 'up'?" she asked him.

"For me? I suppose it is," he said.

Luna smiled again – this time it was the enigmatic smile that Harry remembered from Hogwarts. "What does that make me, then?"

"Erm... upside down?" he ventured.

Luna said, "The blood rushing into your head is certain evidence that, in fact, you are the one who is upside down."

"It looks to me like you're hanging from the ceiling," Harry said with a grin.



“You might want to consider coming out of that headstand, although your face looks rather fetching in Gryffindor red,” Luna suggested. Harry eased himself down, and Luna continued, “I was not upside down, of course. Gravity still rules – you could feel it, obviously. Still, your perception of the world differed from mine, and you held to that view in the face of my insistence to the contrary. You could not describe yourself as right side up, nor would it have been appropriate to describe yourself as upside down. You, Harry Potter, were downside up.”

“You’re telling me that you live your life in a constant headstand?” Harry laughed.

“I am downside up, thank you. Most of the rest of the world is firmly attached to the ceiling,” Luna said seriously. “Which are you?”

“I can do a headstand now and then,” Harry offered.

“You should do so sparingly,” Luna recommended seriously. “I’m loony, you know.” Harry and Luna talked about nothing in particular until Ron walked in, a tray of snacks and a pitcher of juice in hand. Luna didn’t raise the issue of the inconsistent shadows again; Harry thought that was strange but somehow predictable.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

### OUT IN THE OPEN

August 19, 1996

8:00 pm

Harry ran his hands through his hair, which only served to enhance its messiness. He was overwhelmed, despite Mr. Tonks' best efforts – everything was complicated, and there was so much to digest. He wished he'd never come down from the garret.

"Let me see if I understand this," Harry reviewed. "When Sirius' will was approved, they restored his rights. When they restored his rights, he got custody of me... something of a problem, of course. They didn't bother to change guardians because Dumbledore was already my wizarding guardian, and I was living with the Dursleys anyway –"

" – and everyone with a say was too busy wrangling about the emancipation issue to pay any mind," Lupin grumbled.

Harry pressed on. "Diggle took charge of the money because he was in charge of Sirius' estate, and... was he my conservator, like Remus, or was that missed as well?"

"He was temporarily appointed as conservator, pending execution of Sirius' will." Mr. Tonks explained. "According to Amelia, it was the consensus that Dumbledore would not be awarded both guardianship and conservatorship. She said it was quite a tussle."

"A tussle bought and paid for by Malfoy, no doubt," spat Lupin. "He played this from the start. You'd almost think he knew in advance what Sirius had planned."

"Dedalus would never have tipped Malfoy – of that I have no doubt at all," Mr. Tonks insisted.

Harry returned them to the matter at hand. "So that's why Diggle was able to use my money, and... and sell my name," he concluded.

Mr. Tonks nodded. "That's it, in a nutshell. No one at the Wizengamot was watching carefully, and Gringotts granted Dedalus full access based on the signed order. The share in the Daily Prophet was purchased with your funds, not from the Black Trust or Sirius' accounts. Dedalus wanted to be sure that the share would belong to you, even if the other beneficiaries contested Sirius' will. I'd have probably done the same, in his place. You could contest the licensing arrangement, of course – Dumbledore should have been the one giving permission, in theory – but MacLeish will drag his feet with the Wizengamot. Two years will expire long before you ever obtain a ruling. Keep this in mind, Harry – it's a wizarding agreement, not a Muggle contract. Dedalus made a good choice there; I'm a bit surprised that MacLeish agreed to it. As for the rest... Vox is arguing that the Prophet coined the phrase 'the Boy-Who-Lived' in 1981. I wish them Godspeed with that argument; they'll need it. They should prevail with 'Bloody Harry', though I can't imagine why they'd want to protect that."

Harry buried his face in his hands. "This can't get any worse... or can it?"

Mr. Tonks patted Harry on the shoulder. "You still need to decide how to handle the relief payment issue. Perhaps we should take a detour, before pressing on? I think Dumbledore should be here for this." Harry looked up, ready to pounce, but saw the smile on Mr. Tonks' face and held back.

When Dumbledore was settled at the table, Mr. Tonks said, "Harry, I want to talk about how to gain your reinstatement at Hogwarts."

"You're kidding?" Lupin blurted.

Dumbledore leaned in, clearly interested. "What is it that you have in mind, Theodore?" he asked.

Mr. Tonks' eyes flickered for a moment at the sound of his given name, but his smile remained. "I see two approaches," he explained. First, we could take the bribery investigation public. One advantage to Vox owning the Prophet is that they'll sink their teeth into any scandal

that presents itself. If you don't believe that, then spend a few days with some Australian wizards. The public outcry would do most of the work for us. They might even demand Fudge's ouster –"

"There is a timeworn aphorism that says 'be careful what you wish for; you might just get it'," warned Dumbledore. "We should pay heed to this where the Minister is concerned. What is your second approach?"

Mr. Tonks held his voice down. "We possess more information in this matter than does the Ministry. That's unlikely to change – this sort of thing isn't exactly their cup of tea, after all. If used properly, the information provides us with valuable leverage over the Board of Governors, yes?"

Dumbledore frowned. "I will reserve my comments on both alternatives until Harry has had his say. Harry, is there anything you wish to contribute?"

Lupin eyed Mr. Tonks suspiciously. "Ted... that sounds a lot like blackmail," he warned.

"I'm talking about using the information we possess to Harry's best advantage," Mr. Tonks returned.

"I'm inclined to the first approach," Lupin admitted. "I've no love lost for Fudge, and I think the Board of Governors should be held accountable. The second approach rises and falls on the strength of the leverage. I can't imagine Amelia would go for it, either."

"That's not required, is it?" Mr. Tonks observed.

Dumbledore sat impassively. "Do you have an opinion on the matter?" he prodded Harry.

Harry wondered aloud, "Could we really end up with someone worse than Fudge?"

Dumbledore answered the question with a question. "You surely have at least a passing familiarity with Muggle history, and – despite your

OWL results – you have surely acquired some knowledge of the history of magic. You have also had some experience with the Ministry, for good and ill. Given what you know, what conclusion do you draw?”

Harry nodded solemnly. He said to Mr. Tonks, “I agree with Remus about the second choice; I can’t support that. Dumbledore’s right about Fudge,” continued Harry. “We shouldn’t risk it. I appreciate what you’re trying to do, but I’m all right now.”

“What do you mean by that?” Lupin asked anxiously.

Harry searched for the right words. “Everything’s changed. I... I haven’t really thought about it much... I’ve tried not to think about it, but... do you really think I could get what I need from sixth year classes?”

“I’m certain that the faculty could arrange all the supplemental training you need,” Mr. Tonks offered. “Everyone around you would cheerfully pitch in wherever useful. We were discussing that possibility on the drive up –”

Lupin cut in. “Don’t fret, Harry. Ted and Odd and I were in the front of the van, and there was an Imperturbable charm up from the start,” he promised.

“We each came at this from a different angle – no surprise in that – but we were all concerned about what you might be sacrificing by missing out on your last two years,” Mr. Tonks continued. “It’s not just about the classes; there are all the other aspects – friends, parties, Quidditch, and the like.”

Dumbledore asked Harry, “Do you harbour any fears or concerns about maintaining your friendships?”

Harry looked back at Dumbledore, and grew frustrated with himself. He wondered why should feel agreeable around Dumbledore, so much so that at times it took concerted effort to hold on to his anger. He checked the corners of his mind, but no one else was there. He

didn't want to answer Dumbledore's question honestly – he didn't want to be weak. A lie didn't occur to him, so he was left with the truth.

"It's best that I go on my own," he said. "There are ... things I need to learn, and I need to learn them now. I need to do things my own way... but I don't think I can do this alone. I wish I could. I mean, I'll probably fight alone in the end, but I still want my friends... if they'll have me..."

Dumbledore smiled broadly, and his eyes nearly shone. "There is no reason for you to be sorry," he said. "In an apprenticeship, you will have a measure of freedom, you will not be alone, and you will not be deprived of your friends. I wish that you could be afforded more than that. The steps necessary to reconcile even those basic requirements will pose a challenge, but we shall meet the challenge." Harry nodded in acknowledgement – he wanted to trust, but the Headmaster hadn't earned it.

"Shall we tackle the question of the relief payments, then?" Mr. Tonks asked. "Your options are straightforward – it's really a matter of degree."

Harry rubbed at his bleary eyes. He wasn't sleepy, just spent. "Let's finish this," he muttered.

Mr. Tonks glanced at one of his papers. "Right, then. Between July 21 and July 30, Dedalus took in just over eighteen million pounds of relief. I've asked that he provide fully updated... Harry? Are you all right? Do you need some water?" Harry closed his eyes and waited for the coughing fit to subside.

"What portion of the eighteen million pounds has already been expended, if I might ask?" asked Dumbledore.

Mr. Tonks consulted another paper. "Harry...?" he asked tentatively.

Harry smiled faintly when he realized that Mr. Tonks was awaiting permission to speak further in front of Dumbledore. He nodded, and Mr. Tonks continued, "About four million is still liquid. Nearly all the

rest has been converted to Galleons, and disbursed in accordance with the will.”

Harry cleared his throat. “Do I have enough money to fix this?” he croaked.

Mr. Tonks laughed. “That’s hardly a problem. The Potter Trust could cover it from its Muggle liquid assets alone. If you set the Potter Trust aside, then you’ll run through all of Sirius’ remaining funds and the majority of your own vault as well,” he said.

“Why wouldn’t I use the Potter Trust?” Harry asked.

Mr. Tonks explained. “All of the appointed trustees are either dead or unavailable. That leaves the institutional trustee – I believe you’ve met Fliptrask? Everything will be according to the rules, and goblin rules are as complicated as rules can possibly be.”

Lupin asked, “What do you want to accomplish here, Harry? It’s obvious that you want to repay everyone. Do you have an end result in mind?” Mr. Tonks took out a bound pad of paper and a Muggle biro, and watched expectantly.

“When everything’s over and done with, I’d like to live here without being hated,” Harry said. “If Diggle sent me a bill, I’d hate me.”

“Right,” said Mr. Tonks. He read aloud as he wrote. “No... villagers... with... torches... and... pitchforks... storming... the... tower.” He started to laugh and Harry weakly joined in. Lupin and Dumbledore looked on blankly.

Mr. Tonks waved his hand dismissively. “Never mind; it’s just a reference from the cinema. You’re probably talking about repayment plus some sort of interest, Harry. There’s a long legacy to overcome, after all.”

“I don’t care about the money,” Harry sighed. “I want to be able to walk down the High Street and feel good about it.”

Mr. Tonks scribbled furiously on the pad of paper. "Well... this affair has probably left a number of people in a fairly bad way. If you return the actual relief payments, plus... ten percent, I think... and cover resulting incidentals – missed rents, repossessed property, that sort of thing... you should get the end result that you want."

"You might also consider doing something for the village as a whole," Dumbledore suggested.

Harry nodded readily. "I like that idea," he said. "How would I go about doing it?"

Mr. Tonks tapped his biro against the table for a few moments, and then offered, "I can meet with the community council – without referring to you, of course – and explore the local needs. Do you have anything in mind?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't know... a school, new roadways, whatever they think they need."

Mr. Tonks eyebrows shot up. "You really want to make a splash, don't you? Do you have a figure in mind?"

"What – how much to spend? I have no idea..." Harry pulled a number from the air. "Half a million pounds," he said firmly.

Lupin sat up in his chair. "Harry!"

Harry blurted out seriously, "What, not enough? We could make it a million, I suppose –"

"Half a million is more than enough, Harry," Mr. Tonks laughed. "This is about your new friend, isn't it?"

Harry frowned. "It's about having a home, and not wanting to screw it up," he grumbled. "Heather has nothing to do with this... well, she told me what was happening, so she has something to do with it..."

"Harry, I have no problem with the fact that she's a Muggle. In fact, I'll give you credit for aiming high," Mr. Tonks sniggered.



“What do you mean by that?” demanded Harry hoarsely.

“Would you like some water? You’re becoming terribly red,” Lupin jested.

“I was stunned when Dora told us who you were seeing,” Mr. Tonks explained eagerly.

Harry muttered, “I’m not seeing anyone,” but was roundly ignored.

Mr. Tonks ploughed on, “You take off to the country – Dora wouldn’t tell us where, but it didn’t take Andromeda long to guess – and end up running into Heather Magruder, the bad girl of classical music. What are the chances of that?”

Harry’s brow furrowed. “The bad... what?”

“That’s what the Times calls her – ‘the bad girl of classical music’,” Mr. Tonks told him. “She’s quite a lightning rod – people either love her or hate her... sorry, Harry, I should explain myself. We maintain a subscription at the Royal Opera House. The young lady drives the purists insane. She wears what she wants to wear, she sings off-program... she actually performed one aria backward – it was really quite clever, I thought. She sings pop songs, as well; she has a band with her, along with orchestra. Of course, there was the bit with mortally offending the Royal Family...” He laughed. “Andromeda and I find her refreshing; the couple with whom we attend absolutely despise her. I imagine that the two of you might share some things in common – the pressures of fame at an early age and such.”

Lupin mustered a parental tone. “How bad of a bad girl is she?”

Mr. Tonks snorted. “I can’t imagine – when would someone like that actually have the time to be bad? Of course, Vox has its hooks into her... she’s too young for Page Three, at least.” Harry choked, and Mr. Tonks and Lupin laughed hysterically.

After composing himself, Lupin turned serious. "MacLeish would have a field day if his people caught the two of you together, I suspect," he warned. "You really should be cautious about that."

"There's nothing to see; we're only friends," Harry said. A dark thought tugged at the back of his mind - what if Heather had been put up to being his friend? - but he banished it.

"I'll get started on a plan for settling things, then," Mr. Tonks said as he began to collect his things. "It'll take a few days to execute; we don't want to exchange too many Galleons at once."

Harry rose and shook his hand. "Thank you," he said. "There's one more thing. You said you didn't take your share from Sirius' will. I want you to have it. I'll even cover it myself, if that would be better."

Mr. Tonks shook his head. "That's very kind of you, but I don't think —"

"He wanted you to have it," insisted Harry; "Please take it." Mr. Tonks sighed at him.

"Would you care for a meal, Harry?" Dumbledore asked. "You have had nothing to eat since this morning."

Harry stopped for a moment. "I have food at... erm... in my room. Remus, would you come by later tonight?"

"I'd... I'd love to," Lupin said. "How much later?"

"Late," Harry returned. "Ron and I have some catching up to do."

Harry lingered by the black door that led out of the walled courtyard. "Are you up for keeping a secret?" he asked Ron.

Ron crossed his arms. "I told you I can keep secrets," he insisted.

"There are only three other people alive that know this one, including me," Harry told him. "You're about to become the fourth. I just have a feeling that you should be in on this."

Ron eyed him suspiciously. "That doesn't sound like you... sounds more like Trelawney."

"Call it a hunch, then," Harry frowned.

"Okay, you've got me," Ron said casually. "What's the big secret?"

Harry dug a scrap of parchment from his wallet. "Read this, and look that way," he said, pointing toward the southernmost stack.

"This reminds me of getting into Grimmauld... well, would you look at that? Explains a lot, actually," said Ron.

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

"I wondered where you were staying," Ron returned. "I mean, the tower is big and spotless and there's no sign of house-elves. You didn't care what rooms anyone took, and I didn't see any of your things inside."

"I hadn't even gone inside the tower until today," Harry admitted.

"Who else knows about this – can you tell me that much?" Ron asked.

"Remus and Dumbledore," Harry answered. "Remus has always known – Sirius told him. Dumbledore can see through the wards."

Ron raised an eyebrow. "You're joking, right?"

Harry shook his head. "No, I'm not. He looked right through them."

"It is Dumbledore... I mean, everyone knows he's powerful and all – but... bloody hell..." Ron whispered.

Harry gestured toward the bothy. "Shall we?" he offered.

"The beach is down there, too, isn't it?" Ron asked hopefully.

Harry nodded. As they walked through the grass, which was increasingly trampled down, he asked, "So... how have the last two weeks been for you?"

"Harry," Ron said smugly, "at last, it's good to be me."

Harry snorted. "A bit full of yourself, are you?"

"If I'd known what would come of saving Ginny's life, I would have tossed her from a broom a long time ago," Ron laughed.

"Okay, I knew you were going spare before, but..." Harry began.

Ron fished through his pockets. "I had to bring these – I figured you'd never believe me otherwise," he said.

Harry fumbled with the loose clippings, and glanced at them as he walked. The largest was from Teen Witch Weekly. Beneath a fairly flattering close-up of Ron, the headline read: 'Ron Weasley Drops Into Teen Witches' Hearts'. Harry stifled a snort, and then moved to a snippet from the Daily Prophet:

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'Radical Ron' mobbed on Diagon Alley

Reluctant hero Ron Weasley found himself surrounded by hundreds of well-wishers on Diagon Alley Wednesday afternoon. Weasley, whose death-defying leap to save his sister from a dangerous criminal struck a chord with witches and wizards everywhere, graciously greeted fans for over an hour before Dark Force Defence League security wizards escorted him to his destination.

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Ron reached over and snatched one of the clippings. "This is the best bit," he said proudly. It was an inset box from Teen Witch Weekly, rather like the 'Harry's Love Life' item that had caused so much trouble:

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The HOT TEN List: TWW's rundown of the world's hottest young wizards

Readers' owls have been flying furiously this week, and the result is a surprising new HOT TEN list...

10. Oliver Wood. Puddlemere United's new shining star is featured on the team poster. He's the darling of the Quidditch world this year, and we think that Wood is good in any position.

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"Poor Oliver!" Harry cringed.

"It only gets better," Ron chuckled. "Get a load of number eight."

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8. Gilderoy Lockhart. Both the wizard and his books remain popular. It gets harder every week to think of Lockhart in a list of young wizards yet your votes keep coming in, readers. It's a little off when mother and daughter are keen on the same wizard... but who are we to judge? Rumour has it that Lockhart has been released from St. Mungo's in London, where he has been recovering from injuries reputedly sustained in a nasty confrontation with a basilisk.

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"I suppose it wouldn't look as good if they said he was recovering from injuries sustained when he crossed his own students," Harry fumed. "Do you think they really let that git loose?"

"Merlin, I hope not," Ron said. "Keep going, then – it gets better still, mate."

Harry turned the clipping over and immediately cringed.

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3. Harry Potter. Powerful, brooding, daring, dangerous, and eyes to die for – the essence of Hot. He's not exactly the one you bring home for the Mother test – not without good wards and a houseful of Hit Wizards – but frankly we don't care. They say that Harry brings out the best in those around him. That must be true, because one of his mates has unexpectedly flown to #1...

2. Kirley Duke. It's good to be the lead guitarist. The Weird Sisters have topped the WWN worldwide charts for five years, and darling Kirley has spent more than 100 consecutive weeks in the 'Hot Ten'. Rumour has it that he's moving on – say it isn't so!

1. Ron Weasley. How can you not swoon for him? He's mad enough to drop half a mile without a broom, but sweet enough to do it for his sister. Ron's clearly as daring as his mate Harry, but we think he passes the Mother test. Too good to be true? We'd like to find out for ourselves...

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"This is disturbing in... I don't know, at least a dozen ways," Harry said.

"Do you know how many owls I got in the last week, mate? Any idea?" Ron beamed. "Seven hundred! Girls sent me their knickers, for Merlin's sake – their knickers!"

"That's great, Ron... fantastic... erm, couldn't be happier for you..." Harry stammered.

Ron closed his eyes and indulged in a fatuous smile. "I'll be swimming in girls, all year long!"

Harry snorted, and then chuckled.

"What?" asked Ron.

Harry spluttered, and began to laugh.

“What? What’s so funny about that?” Ron whined. “I finally get some attention of my own – because I did something that was effing noble – and you laugh?”

Harry struggled to calm himself. “I’m sorry, Ron... I’m... heh...I’m really sorry... ha... it’s just... heh-heh... you have to hear this music that Sirius... that Sirius...” He lost the battle, and cackled.

Ron snatched back his clippings and jammed them into his pockets. “Some friend you are!”

Harry gave Ron a friendly pat on the shoulder. “I said I was sorry,” he managed. “I’m happy for you. I hope you’re shagged by... I don’t know... by two girls a day!”

Ron nearly choked. “SHAGGED? By t-two a day...?” he asked nervously. “I don’t know... I mean, could a person actually survive that?”

Harry completely lost it and Ron threw up his hands; “Fine... laugh it up; go ahead – mock me if you want. This is going to be a smashing year, and you can’t spoil it,” he pouted.

Between fits of laughter, Harry began, “You won’t have to worry about me. Just wait until Hermione...” The laughter stopped. “You were going to tell me about her. Look, I know something happened – it’s the details I don’t have.”

Ron looked around nervously; he wouldn’t meet Harry’s eyes. “Her parents came for her the same morning that you left. First, she had a terrible row with her mum, and then... there’s no nice way to put it, Harry. She had a... oh, I don’t know; McGonagall gave some long name for it... I’d call it a breakdown.”

Harry snapped, “What do you mean, a ‘breakdown’?”

Ron sighed. “I mean things exploding, curling up in the corner, screaming if anyone touched her, babbling nonsense... she might have ended up at St. Mungo’s, except that Dumbledore insisted she wouldn’t be safe there.”

“So what happened? Was she taken to Hogwarts, then? Where is she?” Harry demanded, his voice rising with each word.

“She seemed better by the time they left – walking on her own, answering questions,” Ron said. “But the look in her eyes... Harry, something’s not right with her, not at all. Me, I keep seeing her on her knees in front of HIM. And that scream... It just plays over and over in my mind. I... I really wonder, you know, what he did to her?”

“Where is she, Ron?” Harry repeated more forcefully.

“McGonagall made arrangements, and Dad took the three of them to catch a Muggle flying machine,” Ron told him. “Other than that, I’m in the dark.”

“When are they coming back?” Harry asked nervously. “Dumbledore said it would be at the start of term.”

“McGonagall was hoping for that – I swear that’s all I know, Harry,” Ron said helplessly.

Harry took deep calming breaths. All the feelings that flooded him two weeks earlier seemed to be coming back – all the anger and frustration, all the desire for vengeance, and other things that he didn’t choose to acknowledge. He felt the need to run but decided against it; instead he closed his eyes for a moment and then trudged onward. Ron followed, and Harry didn’t mind.

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Harry let Ron lift the tone arm off the record album. As soon as he set it aside, Ron began to laugh; he didn’t stop until he was bright crimson. “That’s un-bloody-believable!” he spluttered. “You mean he...? And they...? I can’t believe that worked!”

Harry shook his head. “I don’t get it. Well, I mean, I get it... It’s just hard to imagine.”



Ron waved the Barry White album jacket madly, and tried to force his voice into a low rumble. "Baby, let me take all of my life to find you," he purred, "but you can believe it's gonna take the rest of my life to keep you." Harry cackled and Ron coughed from the strain on his throat.

"Puts Sirius in a different light, eh?" Harry blurted.

"Gods, yes!" Ron hooted. "I just can't believe... Whitehorn actually said there were two at a time?"

Harry held up one hand solemnly and said, "I swear to you that he did."

Ron traced his hand along the shelves of record albums. "No wonder Sirius went Muggle for a while," he murmured.

"There was a lot more to it than that," Harry pointed out. "You have to consider his parents. I'd say the portrait of Mrs. Black is spot on, if Sirius' journal is true. Most of the family was signing up with Voldemort. He had to get away from them."

"So he set himself up a quarter-mile away from his parents – brilliant," Ron said.

"Thumbing his nose at them, I suppose," mused Harry.

Ron's eyebrows rose. "What-ing his nose?"

"Sorry – Muggle expression," Harry explained. "He moved in here to spite them, I think."

"They didn't know he was here; so, how was he spiting them?" Ron wondered. "Sounds to me like he enjoyed sneaking about."

"Maybe a little of that, too," Harry allowed. "It's hard to tell from his journal. He's all over the place."

Ron flopped down on the settee. "So... what's it like, being free?" he asked abruptly.

“How would I know?” Harry fumed. “I’ve minders around every corner.”

“Yeah, I suppose,” said Ron. He pointed at the milk crate full of record albums. “If you wanted to get another one of those music thingies –”

“Records,” Harry corrected.

“Right, whatever. If you wanted another one, what would you do?” Ron asked.

Harry shrugged. “I suppose I’d have to ride into Edinburgh,” he figured. “There isn’t a music shop in St. Ebb.”

“So you’d just hop on that bloody thing of yours, and go? Without having to ask? Without having to tag along with an older brother... or have a younger sister tagging along with you?” Ron rolled his eyes. “Sounds like freedom to me.”

“Is that why Bill and Ginny came with you, then?” asked Harry.

Ron sighed. “Look, mate, I wasn’t planning a Weasley invasion – honestly! Mum was right cross with me over running off. Part of the reason she let me come here was that Bill was hot for it.” He chuckled, and added, “Between you and me, I think the real reason he came was to see Tonks.”

“What? But I... erm... I thought Bill was seeing Fleur Delacour, and Tonks was... uh...” Harry spluttered.

Ron managed a truly awful imitation of Fleur’s accent. “I zink zat Bill is finished vith ze French lessons,” he smirked. “I couldn’t have been happier. Mum got off of me and onto him: ‘Bill Weasley, even a veela can’t hold your attention! You need to cut that hair of yours and settle down! At this rate, I’ll be Albus Dumbledore’s age before I see a grandchild!’

Harry winced. “How did Bill take it?”

Ron smiled broadly. "He actually blamed the Order – said he couldn't settle down now, it would interfere with his duties."

"What about Ginny?" asked Harry.

"Here's the whole thing, see?" Ron said. "Professor Lupin dropped by Grimmauld Place early this morning, when I got my letter from you. Mum was going on about it, and he said that he was coming up here. He'd only stopped by to tell Dad something before he met up with Mr. Tonks. So, one thing led to another, and next I knew, Bill and me were in. We were going to Floo to someplace in Edinburgh, and Dad was going to arrange a Ministry car to meet us. When we went to get Mr. Tonks at the Leaky Cauldron, Luna and her dad were there and Ginny was with them; he was in London for something to do with the printing machine. Anyway, he insisted on driving us. He said that he and Luna were heading north anyway – somebody saw a something-horned something near somewhere, I suppose. Well, Ginny was furious that Luna was out of bed, let alone riding around the countryside. She was scary, like... like Mum, right? She told Mr. Lovegood that Luna wasn't going anywhere for at least a day after we got here."

"Nice of her to speak for me," Harry said.

"Look, Harry, I – " Ron began.

Harry waved his hand. "It's all right," he insisted. "If I'd known they were coming, I'd have invited them to stay. That's a long trip; I know I was knackered after riding here."

"That's not where I was going," Ron said, "but it was nice of you to speak for me." Harry stuck out his tongue, and Ron went on, "I was going to say that I'm sorry I didn't come with you in the first place. I'm sorry about a lot of things, mate."

"Ron, you don't have to –" Harry started.

"Best to get it all out now," Ron said stiffly.

“Ron...” Harry began but stopped. He wanted to chide Ron for giving in to whatever the brains had revealed, for acting as though his fate was divined. He also knew that he had less credibility to criticise than nearly anyone else on the face of the earth.

“Sometimes I haven’t liked you very much,” Ron said abruptly. “It all looked good from the outside, right? You were famous, you had money, you were Dumbledore’s favourite, you played Quidditch your first year – your first year... it all looked good to me. You were nice enough to let me along for the ride, so I kept my mouth shut and I just went along. That’s when I started hearing it. ‘Who’s that?’ people would ask. ‘Oh, that’s, er, Harry Potter’s mate, isn’t it?’ ‘Yeah, um, what’s his name?’ It hurt, Harry. Times like that, I didn’t like you very much at all.” He shook his head and wrung his hands. “I guess I didn’t have a clue.”

Harry leaned nervously against the kitchen counter. He had been ready to snap back at Ron until the last. Instead, he watched and waited.

Ron leant his head against one hand, then nervously ran his hand across his face. “It’s there every minute,” he said. “What if it’s two years before... you know, before it happens? Part of me wants to nab your motorbike and just make it happen, right? Just make it happen.”

Harry edged to one of the armchairs but kept silent.

“You know why I won’t do it? Because I want it to mean something,” Ron said, his voice reduced to a ghostly whisper. “Because I want to mean something.”

Harry didn’t know what to say, but his mouth opened anyway. “Come on, mate, you mean something,” he said hoarsely. “You know? Weasley is our King, after all.”

For a moment Ron looked stung, but then his lip quivered, and then he roared with laughter – nervous laughter, almost manic, but laughter all the same. “Well... there is that,” Ron managed to splutter. Harry exhaled.

Ron drew a chessboard on a piece of paper, and they played Muggle chess with items from the kitchen and Sirius' bric-a-brac. Harry had trouble remembering if the rubber Galleon was a bishop or a knight; it didn't matter, of course. In the midst of trouncing Harry for the third time, Ron said abruptly, "So... are you going to tell me about her, or am I supposed to guess?"

Harry was about to take Ron's Tube token with his saltshaker, but he dropped it and managed to scatter half the board.

"Shall we call that a draw?" Ron smirked. "Out with it, then." He crossed his arms. "I know a bit already, but I'd really rather hear it from you."

"There's not much to tell," Harry muttered. He thought for a moment and then identified the traitor: Tonks has a big mouth.

Ron stood up for a stretch. "Eating with the Muggles is just for fun?"

Harry put away the impromptu chess pieces. He thought of Tonks and of the Marquis de Maupassant's nasty rope tricks, and the corners of his mouth turned up. "I like the food," he said.

"Erm... so what does she look like?" Ron asked distantly.

Harry opened the cupboard with a sigh; he said, "She has dark hair, black I suppose, and... blue eyes... and she smiles a lot. It's a nice smile. I suppose I sound like a bit of a traitor, going on about —"

Ron went on as though Harry weren't there: "Er... she's not bad to watch from behind, either."

Harry spun around. "What are you going on about...?"

Ron was peering out the window. "Looks like she's headed down to your beach," he said; he turned to Harry and added, "With Ginny, no less! They're laughing; that's a good sign, right?"

Harry froze. "Does Ginny know that Heather's a Muggle?" he asked nervously.

"Yeah, Tonks mentioned it," Ron answered hesitantly.

"That's a relief!" Harry said. "I had visions of Ginny telling her about Hogwarts, or something."

Ron fidgeted. "You know, Ginny's had two years of Muggle Studies. I'm sure she can manage a simple conversation."

Harry's nervousness returned in full force. "Erm... from what Hermione's told me about Muggle Studies... right, then... what do you call the stuff that Muggles run through wires, that makes the television and the appliances work?"

"Tellyfishing...? Um... oh, I know! It's eckeltricity!" Ron said proudly.

Harry burst out the door of the bothy and quickly made for the beach, with Ron close at his heels. Before they made the switchback, Harry heard the strains of Ginny's violin. Ron slapped his own forehead at the sound. Harry hung back for a while and watched Ginny play. Heather nodded a lot and said things that Harry couldn't quite make out. She looked up, spotted Harry, and waved. Ron bumped Harry from behind, and they made their way down the steep path.

Heather smiled at Harry. "Your friend's good – damn good," she said appreciatively.

"I didn't expect to see you," said Harry. "I figured Shona would have you locked up."

"Och, she's all bark," Heather smirked. "I told her that I'd sing scales full-voice in the cottage if she didn't back down, all day and all night. I can manage better than a hundred decibels, you know?"

"I met with the people I told you about," Harry told her. "They're making the arrangements to return all the payments, plus a bit extra. Apparently, it'll take a few days to pull all the money together."

Before he could react, she stepped forward and hugged him tightly. From the corner of his eye, Harry saw Ginny staring at them. He liked the hug but a sense of guilt tugged at him.

Ginny said cattily, "Don't let us stand in the way of a good snogging."

Heather released him and said to Ginny, "It's not like that, really. Harry is..." She stopped and turned back to Harry. "I think you might actually understand me," she said after a long moment; "I've never... well, I haven't had many friends at all, but never one like that."

"I was thinking the same thing," Harry admitted.

Ginny cleared her throat and gestured toward Ron. "The fellow staring at you is my brother Ron. Say hello, Ron." Ron did as he was asked, and his voice cracked. He started to cringe in embarrassment until Harry stepped in front of him.

Harry muttered under his breath, "How do you plan on getting... you know... twice a day, if you can't even say 'hello'?" Ron blushed furiously, but then regained his composure.

Harry turned around. "Sorry to interrupt you," he said. "I imagine you're here to sing?"

"I've been doing a lot of listening," Heather said. "Ginny's further proof of my pet theory, you know."

Harry bristled inside, but betrayed nothing. "How is that?" he asked innocuously.

Heather explained. "She has near-perfect pitch, picks up songs by ear, and could probably scrape along in a studio orchestra. She tells me she first played the violin a year ago – one bloody year ago – and she's only been at it hard for a month. Oh, and I left out the best part: she plays a Stradivarius. Do you have the slightest idea what that violin is worth?"

"It belonged to my godfather," Harry said. "It was in the Black family for something like 200 years."

Heather's lips thinned. She held out her hands and asked Ginny, "May I?" She showed the violin to Harry, and pointed out a number of features that he didn't understand. She directed his attention to a particular spot on the back of the neck. "Look here; there are initials marked in the finish – N.P. Do you recognise those?"

Harry thought for a moment, and shook his head. "There was a P.N. in the Black family," he said hesitantly. "N.P. isn't familiar. Of course, I don't know a lot of the family history. I mean, I'm not a Black; I'm a Potter, actually."

Heather seemed to process the information for a moment before she returned to her original point by explaining, "This is the... let me think... the fourth Stradivarius I've seen. It looks in better condition than the other three. One of those was valued at better than a million pounds." Ron began a coughing fit. Heather gently returned the violin to Ginny.

"We were going to play 'cat-and-mouse', then?" Ginny asked Heather.

Heather nodded. "You get the idea, right? It's really simple. I sing a phrase, and you repeat it. If you feel something different, just go with it. We'll see what happens."

The exchange quickly became very rich and very complex. Before long, they were singing and playing simultaneously – Ginny had no trouble following where Heather was leading. Ron sat down on the sand and followed attentively. When they finished, he applauded loudly.

"We'll have to do this again," Heather said to Ginny. "I'm afraid to imagine how well you'll play in a few months' time. Who's your teacher, anyway? It must be someone big."

Harry frowned and said, "Actually, he's rather small; she studies with Professor Flitwick at our school. It's amazing what that violin has let you do in a month. I'm sure Professor Flitwick will be very excited to see it, Ginny. I'm sure he'll find it terribly interesting."



Ginny glared at him; "Like hell he will," she muttered. Turning to Heather, she said, "I'll be down here every evening until we leave. I hope I get to see you again." She slipped the violin into its case and headed up the switchback without a look back.

"I'd better see to her," Ron said; "Wouldn't want her to do anything stupid, would we?" He took a deep breath and strode toward Heather. "It was wonderful to meet you," he said, extending a hand. "Erm... what can I say? You're bloody brilliant! Oh, and thanks for putting up with Ginny." He shook her hand and then said to Harry, "See you tomorrow, mate?"

"Are you sure?" Harry asked.

Ron nodded. "I'll find you in the morning. 'Bye, Harry... 'bye, Heather."

Heather waited until Ron was out of earshot before she said, "He's not subtle, is he?"

Harry laughed. "It's just... it's a long story – never mind."

She shook her head. "Recently fallen to earth, the lot of you. I'm telling you, my theory is sound."

Harry changed the subject. "How did you get here, anyway? I still have your bicycle."

"I walked," she said. She pointed to a backpack set near the bottom of the switchback. "Your helmet is in there, by the way. You left it behind last night. Um... I'm really sorry she yelled at you like that."

"How much did you hear?" Harry asked.

"Enough," Heather answered. "I figured she might lose it when she saw your motorbike. That's why I thought you looked familiar. There's this old picture of Shona's, with her and three guys and another woman, and one of the guys is sitting on exactly the same motorbike that you ride – I mean exactly. I have to ask you... is it actually the same motorbike?"

Harry wasn't surprised but he still fought back nervousness. He carefully considered what to say and settled on, "One of the people in the picture you saw was my godfather, Sirius Black. It was his bike, and he left it to me. It's possible I know or know of everyone else in the picture."

She paled a bit. "Sirius Black! I don't understand... with everything that the Blacks stood for, and she... I mean, you should hear her... it doesn't make sense."

"Sirius was the black sheep in his family. Considering the rest of them, that meant he was a fine fellow," Harry offered.

"You don't have any more pictures, do you?" Heather asked hesitantly. "Shona lives like she didn't exist until fifteen years ago – almost no pictures, no keepsakes, nothing."

"I was looking through a stack last night in the bothy, after... well, after I went and cooled off," said Harry.

"Do you mind if I see them?" she asked.

"Only if you mind coming inside," he answered boldly.

"I don't know... a young man on the prowl, with his own place... sounds dangerous," she teased.

"I don't bite," he promised.

"What if I prefer that?" she asked.

"You can't be... er... what the...?" he spluttered.

She rolled her eyes. "This is how I play. Get used to it."

He shook his head and said, "Let's just go inside."

Heather lingered over Sirius' record collection. When she saw her own compact disc, she jokingly offered to autograph it; she was quite

surprised when he took her up on the offer. She laughed at the colour scheme of the main room and made recommendations for changes – some serious and some definitely not.

She walked to the far end of the hall and into the bedroom. “So, this is it,” she said; “The whole place is bigger than I would have guessed, much bigger than it looks from the outside.” She sat down on the bed and bounced up and down as though she were testing the springs. “Nice,” she added. Then she stood bolt upright and stopped in front of Hermione’s picture.

“Who is this?” she asked.

“That’s Hermione. She’s a school friend of mine,” Harry returned.

Heather turned to face him and raised an eyebrow. “You have a picture of an attractive girl hanging on your bedroom wall, and this is no school photo. Do you want to try again?”

“Her father took the picture. He gave it to me,” Harry explained.

“Uh-huh. You have a picture of an attractive girl hanging on your bedroom wall, given to you by that girl’s father. I’ll give you another chance if you like,” Heather offered.

“Ron’s my closest mate, but Hermione’s been my best friend for five years,” Harry explained. “She’s very important to me. It’s... it’s complicated.”

Heather said, “I’ll say the same thing you said to me, Harry. Uncomplicate it for me.”

Harry fell silent for a long time. At length, Heather said to him, “You’re a fine piece of work, you know that? You seem like this friendly, funny person, like you’d do anything for anybody, but when I look in your eyes... there’s something different in there, something I can’t place. Explain that to me.”

“If I told you everything, you’d run screaming,” Harry told her.

“We’re both holding back. Tell me what you can,” she offered.

Harry thought through the explanation he’d concocted, and decided to risk it. “You remember that I told you my parents died? They’re dead, all right – they were murdered.”

Heather’s eyes widened. “Oh... God, Harry, I never imagined... I’m sorry.”

Harry continued, “They were in law enforcement, more or less. They had enemies. Those enemies murdered them, and they tried to kill me as well. I was a little over a year old. That’s how I got the scar on my forehead.” She just gaped at him, and it dawned on him that his story was awful even when put into Muggle terms. She sat back down on the edge of the bed and tugged on his arm until he sat next to her.

“Why would anyone set out to murder a baby? That’s awful!” she asked, and tears formed in the corners of her eyes.

“It... it was a sort of family thing. My parents put away a lot of nasty sorts, and they wanted to wipe out the whole family in return. Here’s the thing: they’re still after me. I’ve had my life threatened over and over, and I’ve been face to face with the man who killed my parents. He wants me dead. He wants to hurt me first, and he’s not above hurting people close to me,” Harry told her. “It’s dangerous to be around me, very dangerous.”

He pulled away, and looked at the picture of Hermione. “You wanted to know what you see in my eyes? The man who killed my parents was responsible for Sirius Black’s death in June. At the beginning of this month, he tried to kill Hermione and a number of other people, including Ginny and Ron,” he admitted.

Heather pulled at his arm again. He resisted, and she continued to tug until he sat down again. She reached out and touched his face. Her eyes were terribly blue. “What did you do?” she asked him.

He froze for a moment. “Why did you ask that?”

"Your friends aren't dead. What did you do?" Heather asked, her voice stronger.

"I had no choice," Harry protested. "There was no choice. Either I sat there and watched them die, one by one, or..."

"You killed someone," she whispered.

"It's dangerous to be around me, Heather," Harry said; "I'm dangerous."

Heather began to blurt out questions. "Why did you have to defend your friends? Where were the police? You're obviously well off; why wasn't there security? It doesn't make any sense. Why would that be left to a sixteen year old?"

"I was fifteen then," Harry said flatly, "and you said I didn't have to tell you everything. You can leave if you want. I'd understand."

"I wasn't planning on leaving," she said. "Um... you were going to show me some pictures, right?"

"Are you sure you want to see them?" Harry asked. "Shona must have her reasons... maybe she didn't want you to know about Sirius?"

"Why would she do that? I know it would be hard for her to admit having known one of the Blacks. I suppose it would come down to how well she knew him... oh, God. Do you suppose...? No, that's ridiculous. Of course not." Heather said dismissively.

"What?" Harry asked.

"No... definitely not. I can't imagine it. He couldn't have been..." She sagged and closed her eyes. "Could he have been, you know... my father?" .

Harry gasped. "I was thinking that she might have seen some pretty bad things happen. I hadn't considered that... When were you born – 1979?"

Heather nodded. "June the 17th," she said. "I know where you're going. If you follow that back for nine months, it's September of '78."

"Shona would have known Sirius then," Harry said quietly. "I'd best show you those pictures now."

They moved to the living area. He grabbed the beach picture, where Shona sat to the side with Lupin, and then sat down next to Heather. "Here she is," he said.

Heather seized the picture. "Oh my God," she said. "These are all of the people in Shona's picture."

Harry pointed. "That's Sirius Black. The fellow picking sand from his hair is James Potter – my father."

Heather peered at the picture, and then at Harry. "I can't believe I never put that together from Shona's picture. You certainly have his hair. Is the other woman your mum?"

Harry nodded. "Her name is Lily. She was called Lily Evans before they married. The man sitting beside Shona is Remus Lupin. He's still alive. In fact, he's staying in the tower."

Heather brightened. "He would know, wouldn't he? He would know what this Sirius Black was to Shona. I mean, I don't know if I want to know, but... well, if he would know, then I have to ask him. Do you think he would talk to me?"

"I suppose he would," Harry offered. "He's supposed to come down here to see me, late tonight. If you stick around..."

"In that case, I'm definitely not leaving," Heather resolved. She rose and began to thumb through Sirius' records, one at a time. She managed to extract a stack of music that was familiar to her, and she played one after the other. She pored over the stacks of photographs. He noticed that she seemed drawn again and again to a few of the images, but she never asked about any of the other people there, or showed any sign that she recognized anyone other than Shona. She

didn't seem in the mood for conversation, and he was content to finish reading Sun Tzu's Mastery of the Sword.

Lupin knocked at the door at a few minutes past eleven o'clock. "Hello, Harry," he said as he entered; "I see you haven't touched the décor..." He saw Heather and hesitated. "I didn't know that you were having a guest."

Heather rose and took his hand; she tightly clutched at the photo with her free hand. "Heather Magruder. You must be Mr. Lupin?" she asked.

"I've heard your name. Harry mentioned me?" Lupin asked.

She said, "Yes, he did. You might be able to answer a question for me – at least I hope so."

Lupin's brow furrowed. He took a seat in one of the armchairs, and Harry sat next to Heather on the settee. "I'm happy to assist Harry's friends, when I can. What's your question, exactly?" he offered. Harry picked up on the not-so-subtle emphasis.

Heather told him, "I think you may have known my... er, we'll call her my mother. She gave birth to me, at any rate. I'm certain that she knew Sirius Black."

Lupin's eyes bugged. He cleared his throat several times. "Harry... water, please," he managed. After several sips of water, he again cleared his throat. "Uh... do you know where your mother went to school?"

"She must have attended locally," Heather said. "She took her culinary training in France, but that was after I had been born."

Lupin stroked his chin. "When would this have been?" he asked.

Heather nodded to Harry, who answered, "The summer and fall of 1978, we think."

“Sirius knew quite a few people at that time,” Lupin said, clearly hesitating.

Heather handed him the picture. Lupin gasped audibly. “This brings back... fond memories,” he said quietly.

“That’s my mother, on the right, sitting next to you,” Heather said.

Lupin’s head snapped up. “Who are you?” he demanded.

Heather’s eyes widened, and she edged back toward Harry.

Lupin flung the photo aside. “I said, who are you? Harry, get away from her.”

“I... don’t... I don’t understand...” Heather managed.

“Remus, what in the hell is wrong with you?” Harry snapped.

Lupin flung open his blazer and whipped out his wand. “You have ten seconds to tell me who you are, or I’ll bind you and we’ll just wait for the Polyjuice to wear off,” he seethed.

Heather shrunk back until she was pressed against Harry, but she laughed nervously. “Um... Harry... what’s with the drumstick?” she asked.

“I’d like to know that myself,” Harry muttered.

“Harry, I told you to get away from her. Do as I say – NOW!” Lupin shouted.

Heather wedged herself between Harry and the back of the settee. “He’s a raving lunatic!” she shrieked.

Harry glared at Lupin. He tried to imagine any way to back gracefully out of the situation, and could think of nothing. “Heather... that first time on the beach, what did you say Shona would do to me... you know, over the thing that Diggle did?”



Heather looked to Lupin and then to Harry; her eyes were wild, both angry and afraid. "I said she'd set after you with her cleavers," she snapped.

Harry said loudly, "I'm satisfied."

"Shona..." Lupin whispered. "Not possible... it's not..."

Harry slowly rose and moved haltingly toward Lupin. When he was close enough to reach, he wrapped his hand around Lupin's wand and tugged it free. He set it on the table and returned to sit close to Heather. "Sit down, Remus," he said.

Lupin's breaths were ragged. "Harry... are you sure...?"

"Remus, this is my friend Heather. I'd swear that her mother's the same person as the one in that picture. Shona saw Sirius' bike last night, and she lost it – rather like what you're doing right now," Harry said.

"It's a bit different," Heather said, her eyes fixed on Lupin's wand.

"You have a different last name," Lupin observed.

"I was raised by a cousin. I have her name," Heather returned.

Harry said, "A different last name? Sorry, I just assumed..."

Heather said. "Shona's last name is –"

She and Lupin finished at the same moment. "Malloch."

Heather gaped at Lupin. "It is her in the picture – you did know her!"

Lupin sat bolt upright. "This is ridiculous! I don't know what you're playing at, young lady, but Shona Malloch could not possibly be your mother. When I knew her, she was certainly not pregnant. Unless you were born prior to... let me think... the latter part of 1977, there is no way that you could be her child."

“I was born in June of 1979,” Heather told him.

Lupin snarled, “Shona died in 1978 – October 15, 1978! I’ll never forget that day, not as long as I walk this earth! I don’t know what kind of game you’re playing with me – the both of you – but it needs to stop NOW! I’m going to have to take measures –”

Harry snapped, “Remus, you’re not making any sense. I told you, I’ve met Shona! She lives in the bloody village! She runs L’Oiseau Chanteur – you know, the restaurant I’ve been eating at? I can assure you that she’s the same woman as the one in that picture. She’s Heather’s mother.”

“It’s impossible,” Lupin whispered. “She can’t be... I saw her fall... she was... she was pregnant?” He stared at Heather for several moments – his eyes more bright and alive than Harry had ever seen them – and then slumped forward in a dead faint. His head struck the table with a loud crack!

## Chapter Twenty-three

### A NIGHT FOR MAGIC

"I'm pressing down, right?" Harry snapped.

"It might work, if you'd stop fidgeting!" Heather shot back.

Harry eased out of the way. "Fine! You do it, then!"

Heather cradled Lupin's head, and pressed the bloodstained towel firmly. "I wish he'd move, or something," she said. "I don't like this."

"Neither do I," Harry admitted. No healing charm, he thought, not inside these wards. I can't even get at my wand, he thought, she's practically sitting on the box.

"Then do something about it," Heather said nervously. "You have, um, things you can use for this... right?"

Harry kept his voice even by force of will. "What are you talking about?"

"You're all part of it, aren't you? Your friends, that professor of yours... somehow the Blacks were part of it... dear Lord, you've been here for hundreds of years, haven't you?" Heather rambled. Her hand shook, and fresh blood seeped through the towel.

Harry replaced her hand with his, but let her continue to support Lupin's head. "Erm... you're not making much sense," Harry offered. "Look, we need to get help..." But how? he wondered.

"He's part of it, too... and so was Sirius Black... oh, my God..." She paled, and nearly lost her grip on Lupin.

"For Merl... oh, damn it! Would you just set his head against the floor?" Harry shrieked.

She did as she was told, and then held her hands up as though they belonged to someone else. "I'm half-alien," she whispered.

“You’re... what?” Harry blurted.

She put her hands out, as if to ward him off. “Please... I’ll do whatever you say...I just... you’re right, we have to help him,” she stammered. “Just don’t... don’t zap me, or whatever you do.” She stared at him with wide eyes. “You... you wouldn’t hurt me... would you, Harry? I can see that when I look at you. You wouldn’t hurt me.”

Heather’s babbling finally cut through Harry’s rising panic. “You think I’m an alien,” he confirmed. “You think Remus is an alien. You... look... born in England, Heather, I swear – to human beings. There’s an explanation for all of this –” And I don’t know if I want to be the one to give it, he thought. “ – but right now, we need to help Remus. I need you to run to the tower, as fast as you can. I need you to bring Professor Dumbledore... erm... you know, Albus? If you get to Ron first, give him this and tell him to use his best judgment. Understand?” He fished the parchment scrap with the bothy’s location out of his pocket and roughly pressed it into her hand. When Heather hesitated, he added more loudly, “Do you understand?”

She nodded furiously. “I’ll get your professor if he’s there, or else Ron,” she repeated.

“Go!” Harry snapped.

“Don’t let him die, Harry,” she said quickly, then flung open the front door and dashed off into the night.

Harry tried to remember anything that might help – elementary healing charms that he’d heard Madam Pomfrey use, household herbs for a poultice, anything at all. He was reduced to pressing harder against Lupin’s forehead.

He heard Heather shout something, clearly in a panic, and then he heard Tonks cry out very clearly, “Cor blimey! Where did you come from?”

Harry suddenly couldn’t breathe. He hadn’t thought about his minders, and he certainly hadn’t considered what they might think if someone

unknown to them appeared from nowhere. He wanted to rush out after Heather, but couldn't possibly move his hand.

"Remus, you have to help me here," Harry urged him. "Just open your eyes, all right? I need you to open your eyes." Lupin didn't so much as stir, but it did seem as though the bleeding had stopped. Harry kept telling Lupin to awaken, and willing him to be all right.

Tonks burst into the bothy, Heather close on her heels. "Remus!" she cried out. Before Harry knew what was happening, she had edged him out of the way and replaced his hand on the towel with her own.

"She took the paper from me, and then... pop, she was just gone, and then pop, she was back... and your professor was with her," Heather explained frantically. "He said he... oh God, I need to sit down..."

Tonks flicked her wand with increasing frustration. "I don't understand," she said. "I can't seem to do a thing."

"The bothy isn't just hidden," Harry said. "There's, erm, another ward in place. You won't be able to use that in here."

"Can we carry him far enough?" Tonks asked. "In my Emergency Healer training, they were very clear about not moving someone with a head injury."

"You can help him, can't you?" Heather asked desperately.

"Would you go and wait on Professor Dumbledore, please?" Tonks snapped.

"Right... wait on the... right..." said Heather; she drifted back out the door. A few moments later, Lupin's eyes fluttered and he said something that sounded like erk.

"You're not supposed to scare me like that!" shouted Tonks.

"Mrmble," Lupin said.

“And what in the world were you doing revealing us to a Muggle?” Tonks demanded. “Now the Professor will have to Obliviate her -”

Harry's brow shot up. “He wouldn't dare! Remus is her father!”

Tonks released the towel for a moment and fresh blood flowed. “Her father... is it... is it true?” she breathed.

Lupin cleared his throat and managed, “I'm fine, really – thank you for enquiring.” His voice was groggy and his eyes were slightly crossed. “It's nothing that a dozen flagons of Firewhisky couldn't dull, honestly.”

“Er, sorry, just curious,” Tonks said sheepishly. “I wouldn't say that you're fine, though. You have a concussion – no doubt about that.”

“Ordinarily, I'd recover spontaneously from a minor scratch of this sort. The wards must have interfered somehow,” Lupin groused. “Did one of you send her off?”

“I did,” Tonks said. “We needed to concentrate on you.”

Lupin struggled to sit straighter in the chair, but ended up slumped. “She says she's Shona Malloch's daughter, but that's simply not possible.” He cleared his throat nervously.

“Shona Malloch... wait a minute...” Tonks scratched her head. “She's the chef at that restaurant Harry fancies. I took a look at her particulars.”

“I saw her fall off a cliff. I thought she was dead. We all did,” Lupin said unevenly. “I can't even fathom this.”

Harry said, “I thought that werewolves couldn't have children.” When the room went unnaturally silent, he looked around and added, “What? We all know Remus is a werewolf.” Tonks glared at him.

“It's not an impossibility,” Lupin said nervously, “but it's incredibly unlikely. There's a greatly reduced likelihood of conception, high risk

of stillbirth... and then there are issues of heredity, which are very murky.”

“So, you could be a father... but could you be her father?” Harry asked. When Tonks grunted at him, he added testily, “Look, the question’s already been put.”

Lupin sighed. “Shona and I were together from the end of ’77 until... well, until I thought she had died,” he recalled. “Could I be that girl’s father? If Shona’s really alive, then it’s possible.” He stopped, and added, “It was a different time – things were different then... er, what I mean to say is... people were different about these sorts of... surely you know...”

“It was a very different time, indeed,” Dumbledore said from the doorway; “I came as quickly as I could. May I have a look at you, Remus?”

Lupin eyed Dumbledore warily. “How much did you hear?”

“Enough, my friend,” Dumbledore said. As he prodded Lupin’s forehead, he asked Harry, “Is Miss Magruder’s mother aware of her presence here? The current circumstances could pose a problem, given your rather pointed exchange last evening.”

Lupin sat up with a start. “She can’t come here. Albus, you have to do something. You can’t let her come here – OUCH!”

“Sit still, please. I will not even ask how you managed to injure yourself. So... what would you have me do, Remus? The proverbial cat is out of the bag.” Dumbledore said.

“She should be made to forget all of this,” Remus said flatly.

“She is seventeen years old, and possibly the daughter of a wizard,” Dumbledore said. “Until her paternity is proven otherwise, I will not alter her memory. In any case, I doubt that she would give consent.”

“Harry, does she honestly think I’m her father?” Remus asked hoarsely.

“She suspected Sirius before,” Harry returned, “but she’s surely changed her mind.”

Remus cleared his throat. “But I didn’t say anything that would make her... oh, dear... I did say something foolish – didn’t I?”

Harry smirked at him. “Does ‘she was pregnant’ count?” he asked innocently; “Of course, the fainting might have drawn more attention to it.” Tonks sniggered, and Remus flung his face into his hands.

“Were you really that subtle, Remus?” Dumbledore asked.

Lupin looked up from his hands. “I’ll have none of your twinkling,” he fumed; “This is not a good thing.”

“By all accounts, Miss Magruder is a highly accomplished young woman,” Dumbledore said. “This is a very complicated matter, to be sure, but I choose to disagree with you as to its goodness.”

Lupin scowled. “Let’s assume that all of this is true – that Shona is alive and the mother of this girl. If she’s alive, then she chose to disappear. Now, why do you suppose she might do that... perhaps it was because she discovered that she was pregnant by a werewolf?”

Dumbledore said, “I admit that my recollection is not as sharp on this matter as I would like, but I recall that you had developed a meaningful relationship with this woman. Your despair over the matter was deep and prolonged...”

“...and long buried,” Lupin finished. “I don’t know if I can bear this.”

Dumbledore rose. “You have little choice but to answer Miss Magruder’s questions in some fashion. Once asked and answered, it is a certainty that she will either speak to her mother directly, or insist that the two of you be brought together. The occasion will be as joyful or as painful as you choose it to be.”

Heather appeared at the door. Ron was behind her, positioned in a way that kept her from running away. “Don’t hurt me... please... I... I



won't tell... I swear." She inclined her head toward Ron. "He pointed his stick at me, and I... I just couldn't stay awake. It was that quick... you... you won't let them...?"

Harry rushed over and took her hands. "No one's going to hurt you. Everything's better now – look."

Ron started, "But Harry, she can't -"

"Remus might be her father... or Sirius," said Harry.

"Her father... uh... right, then..." Ron trailed off and moved clear of Heather.

Lupin smiled faintly, and offered, "Perhaps we should try this again?"

Heather shrank to one side, which caused her to bump against Harry. He moved his hands to support her. She flinched, and his spirits fell.

"But he's... and before he was... and there was blood everywhere... but now..." she spluttered. Harry steeled himself, and put an arm around her; this time she didn't flinch. Instead, she turned and clutched at his arm.

"I'm back to my theory again, Harry," she said nervously.

Harry closed his eyes tightly. "Heather, I swear that we're not –" he began.

"You have a theory on these events, my dear?" Dumbledore asked.

She cut him off. "It only took a few days to see that Harry had recently fallen to earth. I can run through all the reasons, if you like. I revised my theory to include Ron and Ginny, of course; if anything, they're even more recent arrivals," she explained.

Ron and Tonks stared at one another. "Erm... arrivals?" Ron asked.

Tonks muttered, "Oh, this should be cracking."

“Heather, I said we’re not –” Harry began again.

“It’s obvious, really. I mean, I’m... I’m not afraid. If you were going to do me in, you’d have done it a long time ago... at least, I think so...” Heather said hesitantly.

Dumbledore said calmly, “I am afraid that you have lost me.”

“You’re all from another planet!” Heather blurted out. “Harry denied it, of course, but he’s surely supposed to do that. I mean, some of you have probably been here for a very long time, but Harry has these big gaps – sorry, but you should have done more revisions on music and books and cinema – and when Ginny said she’d only been playing the violin for a month... I mean, I know she wasn’t lying to me, and that’s just spooky. It’s impossible – you all know that, right? Mr. Lupin was bleeding everywhere, and now he’s sitting there right as rain...” She looked to Lupin and her eyes widened even more. “Shona saw you in your alien form, didn’t she? That’s why she’s been on the run, isn’t it? What do you all look like, I wonder...?” Lupin paled and noticeably squirmed in his chair, and Harry wondered if perhaps Shona had in fact seen Lupin in a different form.

Ron tried to stifle a snort, but couldn’t stop it in time. Tonks squeaked, “I’m sorry,” and began to laugh uncontrollably. Even Dumbledore shook his head and chuckled. Harry didn’t find any of it particularly amusing and he was generally weary of deception.

“What’s so funny? I... I was serious, you know,” Heather insisted.

Tonks dabbed at her eyes. “We’re sorry. It’s an interesting thought...” She broke into laughter again.

“Aliens...” Ron gibbered between snorts and howls.

“Well... glad to have amused everyone,” Heather sulked. Harry led her gently to the settee.

Lupin said, “There are trillions of solar systems out there. It stands to reason that some of them harbour life of some kind. You’re talking

about a long trip, though. I doubt we've been paid a visit; I certainly haven't seen any aliens myself."

"It was silly, I suppose," Heather muttered, "but there has to be an explanation..."

Tonks reached out and took Heather's hand. "We didn't mean to make fun, really," she said, still chuckling. She took a deep breath, and calmed herself. "You've seen some things that must be hard to understand. I suppose we might seem like aliens to you."

Lupin spoke up quickly. "You had other questions. Would you like those answered first? The issue of what we are will require a very lengthy explanation."

Heather hesitated for a moment, and then drew herself up. "Are you putting me off?" she asked.

Lupin sighed. "No. It's far too late for that."

"Fine, then. Was Sirius Black my father?" Heather blurted out.

Harry thought Lupin seemed almost relieved by the question. "I highly doubt that. He spent most of the summer of '77 in Shona's company, in case you didn't know that. He thought that I didn't know; he thought I didn't know a lot of things. By the time Shona befriended me, Sirius was something more like a mad younger brother to her. I can't imagine that they would ever have taken up again," the older man explained.

Heather nodded thoughtfully. "Fair enough. Are you my father?"

Lupin rubbed at his face nervously. "I think your mother would have to answer that question," he said.

"Is it possible, then?" she asked.

"Many things are possible," Lupin evaded.

“How specific do I have to be?” Heather asked. “Did you have sex with my mother in September of 1978?” Tonks had been leaning against one of the shelves of record albums; she abruptly lost her balance and dropped in a heap. Lupin broke into a coughing fit, and Harry and Ron sniggered at both of them.

“That’s about as specific as you can get,” Ron laughed.

“Are you always this forward?” Lupin managed between coughs.

“Most of the time,” Heather said.

Lupin settled himself, and pointed out, “You’re terribly self-assured for a seventeen-year-old.”

Heather’s expression hardened. “I learned to take care of myself a long time ago. No one was there for me, no one at all. My bonnie Auntie Fiona thought I should be set adrift until she saw pounds to be made. She lived off my busking, and she took everything from my first recording deal. Shona... I love Shona, but she’s on edge all the time and she works seven days a week and she’s all guilty about leaving me with Fiona. I just can’t understand her sometimes. She’s so rough and tumble, you know, but then...” She collected herself, and then went on, “Look, here’s the thing. I’ve had a rough go now and then, but I’ve come out all right. What happened that made her change everything? Can you answer that? I mean, she ran for ten years... and she’s still so... I don’t know...? And today...? I’ve never seen her like this. I was half tempted to see if the chemist would give me anything, you know, to settle her.”

“There may be very good reasons why she chose to disappear.” Lupin said cautiously, and then added, “I think it’s time for a private conversation, if you don’t mind... Heather.” He said her name delicately, as though he were afraid it might break.

“I’d prefer that Harry stayed,” said Heather.

Lupin’s sad eyes pleaded with Harry. “This is difficult enough. I can’t... Harry, I just can’t. Do you understand?”

“Are you sure it’s all right for me to...?” Heather asked Harry quietly.

Lupin managed a wry smile and held out his wand to Harry; “Take it with you,” he said. He opened his hands for Heather and promised, “I swear upon all that is holy that I will not harm you.”

Dumbledore let his hand rest on Lupin’s shoulder. “Would you like me to stay?” he asked,

“When we are finished, perhaps you could help me to explain the big picture?” Lupin offered. “Some of what I have to say is purely between she and I.”

“The hour grows late, but I will wait for you,” Dumbledore said. “I shall sit on the beach and listen to the sea.”

“Harry...?” Heather said. She was nervous – Harry could feel it very clearly – but at least the fear was gone from her eyes.

He stopped at the door. “Remus is right; this is between the two of you. I’ll wait outside.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Tonks closely scrutinised Harry. She cocked her head and raised her eyebrows. Harry shrugged. She frowned. No words were required. He sat and dangled his feet over the edge of the cliff and threw a rock over the side.

“This is taking a bloody long time,” he said.

“He’s measuring every last word, you know,” Tonks pointed out. “She doesn’t know what he is, or what we are. He has to work around all of that. It’s not as though the rest is exactly simple, either.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “The way you said that... it makes me wonder if you know more of the story than you’re letting on.”

“Not much more than you already know. He told me a bit about a lost love; never said her name, though. He was falling apart after, you

know, after Sirius died... and then the Wolfsbane Potion stopped working. He was driving himself into the grave, Harry; I just stood in his way. I heard a few things, and... I saw more than enough," Tonks explained.

Harry said, "I'm glad you were there for him, especially last month. You weren't in a good way, yourself."

"It's been a hard summer for everyone," said Tonks.

"It's none of my business, of course, but do you... erm, do you have a thing for Remus?" Harry asked.

Tonks said, "We were there for each other, and that was the end of it. Remus is definitely not the kind of man whom a woman would have a 'thing' for. He's an all-or-nothing type – like someone else I know."

"Harry? Are you still out here?" Heather called.

He hopped to his feet, and rushed to her. "Well?" he called back.

She said nothing. When he drew close, he saw that her eyes were damp. "What happened?" he asked.

"He honestly believed that she was dead, all this time," she said quietly; "I feel badly for him." She waved to Tonks, who waved back. "Your minders are nice enough. Walk with me?" Neither spoke as they made their way to the beach. Harry saw Dumbledore seated below, and he stopped at the top of the switchback

Harry asked, "What did he tell you? I mean, if it's private, I understand..."

Heather said, "He and Shona were together for several months. He obviously cared for her. He told me that he has a disease, an incurable one – I assume you know about that – and then he asked a lot of questions. I think he was worried that I might have inherited it, which is funny, since he never actually admitted that he's my father." She hesitated for a moment, but then added, "I think he's a good man."

“He’s been good for me this summer,” Harry said.

Heather said, “I wish I knew why he felt he needed to lie to me. I could tell it really hurt him.”

Harry stopped walking. “I’m sorry?”

Heather stood beside him. “I spot lies, Harry. I always know... well, almost always. I can’t explain it. It’s a professional hazard, I suppose.”

Harry swallowed hard. “Erm... when I was talking about my family... my parents...?”

Heather snorted. “Anyone would have known you weren’t telling the whole truth. I mean, you admitted that you were leaving things out.”

“So why is spotting lies a professional hazard?” Harry asked.

“The music business is all about lies. Record companies lie to managers about profits... managers lie to performers about percentages... guitarists show up drunk at gigs and claim that they ate bad fish... and drummers, oh, good God, you can’t imagine. Reviewers tell you they love you, and write about how horrid you are. The paparazzi are the only honest ones – you know exactly what they’re out for,” Heather said, her voice growing more bitter with every word. “Everybody says they love you, but they really love what you can do for them.”

“You might not believe this, but that sounds familiar to me. Is there anyone you can trust?” he wondered.

“My boys are all right,” she said. “They’ve been along for the ride for the last three years. I got them the gig, and they watch my back. We click. When this is all finished, they’ll be the only ones who stick around.”

“Your... boys?” he asked.

"The band," she explained. "They travel with me. Three of us go all the way back to busking. Brucie and Skeet used to play on the opposite corner. I started singing with them, which steamed Auntie Fiona to no end until she saw we brought in more together than apart." She added bitterly, "Julian's been trying to sack them. I think Burke has been pushing him on it; for Vox, it's all about lowering the overhead. The last time it came up, I said I'd deliver an album of children's nursery rhymes. Julian backed off for now."

Harry said, "Those are the two blokes I scared off the beach, right?"

Heather nodded. "It's been good to get away from them, from all of the rubbish..." She looked at him strangely but then put on a faint smile. "You know... what you just did, that was quite a trick."

Harry said, "What? I didn't do anything."

"The way you led me away from the point I was making... you really threw me off," Heather said. "I shouldn't be surprised. You do that – you throw me off."

Harry protested, "What are you talking about? How do I throw you off?"

Heather rolled her eyes. "Let's see... I can't tell for certain when or even whether you're lying to me... I let you steer conversations... I flirted with you when you were a complete stranger – I am a flirt, but this hasn't been like me... and then there's all this born-yesterday alien business." Harry snorted, and she playfully patted his arm before she went on, "You didn't even know who I was, but now you do, and I really don't think it makes a difference to you... although I'm not completely sure about that, because you're hard for me to read. You really throw me off, Harry." She began to walk down the switchback, and added, "I think I like that."

"Dumbledore's down there," Harry warned.

"Professor Dumbledore, isn't it?" Heather chided.

"Not really... not anymore," Harry said.



"I know he's down there. I'm going to fetch him. Remus couldn't bring himself to answer the big question alone," Heather said.

"Remus, is it?" Harry teased.

Heather stopped for a moment, and then slowly nodded. "Yeah, I suppose it is. Like I told you, I think he's a good man." As they descended, she abruptly asked, "Why don't you just put me out of my misery?"

Harry came to a halt. "I'm sorry?"

"They're going to tell me anyway, and I'd really rather that it came from you," Heather said quietly; "What are you?"

He looked away, and scanned the beach. The tide was low again, and he saw the glint of exposed rocks in the light of the half-moon. Heather tugged at Harry's arm, to reel him back in. He felt nervous and oddly embarrassed.

"Do you believe in magic?" he asked her.

"You mean like Gandalf and Frodo and all that? You're a bit too tall for a hobbit," she teased.

"That would be 'no'?" Harry asked. Heather laughed loudly – a bit too loudly, Harry thought.

"Right, next you'll be telling me that those sticks are magic wands..." she howled. Her laughter quickly fell to a nervous chuckle, and then stopped entirely. She began walking again, faster and faster; by the time they reached the beach, she was nearly running from him.

"Heather... wait..." Harry called out.

"Are you mad? How do you expect me to believe...? You must be mad!" she snapped without looking back. "You should have stopped with aliens – I could have believed that!"

“Explain it, then! We're not bloody aliens, that's for certain!” Harry shouted back, exasperated. He thought he saw Dumbledore heading toward them, but the beach was mostly cloaked in dark shadows. Heather broke into a run.

“Slow down!” Harry insisted. “It’s too dark – you could hurt yourself!”

“You’re barking mad!” she hollered without slowing.

“Lumos!” Harry boomed, and the beach lit up. Dumbledore was indeed heading in his direction, from the rocks. Heather whirled in shock. She was at the water’s edge and her foot caught in the wet sand. Before she could stumble into the surf, and before he gave the slightest thought, Harry reached toward her and said, “Accio Heather!” She flew twenty feet into his grasp and slammed him to the sand in the process.

“A simple levitation charm would have sufficed,” Dumbledore said calmly. He reached out his hand to help Heather up.

“I... I flew through the air...” Heather said, in a daze. “I... flew. I felt it – it was like being pulled...”

“Yes, you did indeed fly through the air,” Dumbledore said. “Harry summoned you.”

She stammered, “He... didn’t have a stick... um, I mean, a m-magic w-w-w-”

“No, he did not use his wand. Harry is something of a rule breaker, you may recall,” Dumbledore said with a grin. “His rather overpowering attempt to light the beach has surely attracted –”

The beach came alive in a symphony of pops! Bill, Odd Lovegood, Ted Tonks, Shackbolt, and Snape whirled about, wands drawn. Heather reeled as she looked from one to the next.

“Settle yourselves, boys,” Tonks called from atop the cliff. In another instant, she stood amongst them. “If there were a genuine emergency, I would have taken care of it by now.” Bill was the first to put away his

wand, followed quickly by Tonks' father and Mr. Lovegood. Shacklebolt looked to Dumbledore before following suit.

Snape continued to brandish his wand. "Headmaster, I have substantial experience with targeted memory charms. Shall I...?"

"I wouldn't go there, if I were you," Tonks said, "unless you fancy ending up like the last bunch of Death Eaters who crossed Harry." She inclined her head toward Harry, who had quickly moved between Snape and Heather.

"From out of nowhere... I don't know if could ever get used to that," Heather muttered.

"There will be no memory charming," Dumbledore said firmly.

"But... Headmaster... she – is – a – Muggle," Snape managed in clipped tones.

"Miss Magruder is not a Muggle, Severus, and there will be no memory charms performed upon her," Dumbledore returned.

"Not a Muggle... I don't understand... sir," Snape said carefully. Harry didn't like the way Snape said 'sir' – it had the sibilance of Parseltongue. Shacklebolt immediately turned his eyes to Heather; his expression was both calculated and calculating, Harry thought.

Dumbledore arched an eyebrow. "There is no need for you to understand," he said to Snape.

Ron picked his way across the beach, followed closely by Ginny. "I should have known it was just Harry," he called out. He moved casually but his sharp breathing gave him away – he had obviously run from the tower.

Ginny made straight for Heather. "Are you all right?" she asked.

"Other than being half-blinded and pulled through the air, and then seeing this lot just appear from nothing? Sure, I'm smashing," Heather snapped. Her eyes bore into Dumbledore. "It's really magic?"

Dumbledore stared back at her for several seconds and then gave a faint smile. "Yes, Miss Magruder, you have witnessed magic at work," he acknowledged.

Heather gaped like a fish out of water. Ginny took her by the arm; "It might be a good idea to sit," she suggested.

"An excellent idea, Miss Weasley," Dumbledore chimed in. He quickly brought his wand to bear. A dozen outdoor chairs appeared in a cosy circle. Then he marked off an area of sand, and transfigured it into wood for a fire at the centre of the circle. "There, that should be much better."

"Ginny... I... don't know..." Heather stammered, and she clutched at Ginny's hands.

"Let's just sit," Ginny said; "Everything will be fine. We're all people here. Other than magic, there isn't a lick of difference."

"That is a matter of opinion," Shacklebolt murmured.

Ginny glared at him. "That isn't helping," she snapped.

Snape raised his chin and one eyebrow in a classic expression of Slytherin superiority, and then slowly released a chilling smile. "Goodness, Miss Weasley... that merits ten points to Gryffindor," he said smoothly.

"Go to hell, if you haven't yet taken up residence," rumbled Shacklebolt.

"The way is paved with good intentions, Kingsley, lest you were unaware," Snape sneered. "Where have your good intentions gotten you, I wonder? Demoted to life as a minder? That must be positively humiliating."

"No matter how far I may fall, Snape, it is comforting to know that I shall always be able to look down at you," Shacklebolt growled.

"Gentlemen, we are not here to bicker," Dumbledore chided. Snape slipped into his customary dour expression.

"Tell me, Snape, do you practice that before a mirror?" Bill taunted.

Snape crossed his arms. "How like a Gryffindor to cast one last spell after the duel has ended."

Ron cut in. "Um... Professor Dumbledore, why is there an extra chair?"

"Ah, for Remus, of course," Dumbledore replied with a twinkle in his eye. "I should fetch him. He has no business descending that path in his present condition, and he certainly should not Apparate. Miss Magruder does not need to witness her first splinching this evening."

Ron paled slightly. "Erm... neither do I," he said. His voice cracked, which sent the men in the circle into laughter, excepting Snape.

Dumbledore turned to Heather. "Would you excuse me for a moment?" he asked. Heather nodded with more vigour than necessary. She shrank back in her chair when Dumbledore Disapparated. Ginny struggled to engage her in conversation, while Ron quickly turned to Harry.

"What were you trying to do, anyway?" Ron muttered; "I'll bet people saw that light in London."

"It's really dark down here. I lost sight of her, and I thought she was running straight into the sea," Harry explained.

Dumbledore abruptly reappeared, with his arm wrapped around Lupin's shoulders. Snape immediately jumped up from his chair as if to help Dumbledore sit. Dumbledore kept him at bay with a friendly wave. "It is good to perform an assisted Apparation from time to time, in order to remember how the magic feels," he said; "I am fine, Severus."

Lupin smirked, "I take it that the early sunrise was your doing?" Harry took a sudden interest in his own shoes. Lupin grinned, and took the

empty chair between Harry and Tonks. He reached out and ruffled Harry's hair; Harry cringed, Tonks rolled her eyes, Snape looked as though he had bitten on something sour, and Heather chuckled despite it all. Harry quickly turned, prepared to scowl, but she looked as though a weight had been lifted. The scowl deflated into a sigh over Lupin's gesture.

Bantering continued here and there, until Dumbledore's pensive silence drew them all in. Dumbledore sat for a while, listening to the surf, until even Snape appeared expectant. He smoothed his robes, and then directed his gaze to the sky. "This is the sort of night that reminds one of the grandeur of magic, as well as its limitations," Dumbledore said to the stars. "For despite the measured accomplishments and the untapped potential of the magic that is practiced amongst us, there is a magic that lies beyond our reach. It is the magic that binds the universe together, that sets forth the laws governing time and space and nature, that brings us here, and that ultimately calls us home. It is so much greater than us that we can merely afford it the proper sort of awe."

Harry heard a barely suppressed snort. He scanned the circle without moving his head, though there was no need. He stopped at Snape's imperious expression, and summoned as withering a look as he could muster. It merely moved Snape to smirk.

Dumbledore let his eyes rest on Heather. "It is ironic that those who possess the broadest ability to manipulate the forces of nature are also those least likely to recognize the grandeur that surrounds them, or to believe in anything save themselves or their own abilities," he said. Harry was pleased to see the smirk evaporate from Snape's face.

"You have seen magic every day of your life, Miss Magruder, as have we all," Dumbledore told Heather. "In fact, you yourself engage in a very ancient magic, the mysteries of which continue to elude our scholars. Music can manipulate the hearts and minds of men as powerfully as the most powerful charm, and as subtly as the most carefully crafted potion. I have heard a reproduction of your voice, courtesy of Harry's splendid silver discs. You are a most skilled practitioner, indeed." He settled back into his chair, his fingers

forming a steeple beneath his chin. “And so, you sit amongst practitioners of a different magic. I imagine that you have questions. Ask them, and we will do our level best to answer.”

Heather hesitated for a few moments, but then recovered herself and began to fire off questions. Many were quite mundane questions about how wizards lived, and how their lives differed from non-magical folk. She asked whether Tonks’ cosmetics were magical, which led to a demonstration of metamorphing that startled her into silence for a solid minute. She asked about the need for secrecy, but seemed to quickly recognise the rationale behind it.

Some of her questions took Harry by surprise. At one point, she abruptly asked, “How long do you live?” After a series of curious looks spread around the circle, she added, “You can make things fly through the air, you can make chairs appear from nowhere, you can just pop from one place to the next... it’s hard to imagine that you ever get sick, or hurt too badly to fix up. You, um, you do die eventually... right?”

Dumbledore pursed his lips. “That is a most interesting question,” he said. “I am curious as to why you might ask it, but let us set that aside. Tell me – how old would you guess me to be?”

Heather hesitated for a moment, and then offered, “Seventy... no, seventy-five. It’s the skin on your neck, you see.”

There was some smirking around the circle, and Dumbledore smiled. “Wizards generally live longer than non-magical people, but we are certainly not immortal. That does not bar some of us from chasing immortality, but those are on a fool’s errand. There is some variation amongst us, but it is not at all uncommon for a wizard to reach the age of one hundred. I am longer lived than most. I was born in Kent in the Year of our Lord eighteen hundred and forty.” Heather gasped, and Dumbledore’s smile grew wider. He continued, “It is difficult to guess how much longer I might live. The oldest wizard in Britain is roughly thirty years older than I, and the oldest witch is twenty years older still. Both remain quite active; in fact, both work for the Ministry of Magic. The oldest wizard whom I know is nearly one hundred years my senior.”

Heather faced Harry, but didn't meet his eyes. "When I'm old, you and your friends will be middle-aged," she said quietly. He didn't know how to respond, and opted for silence.

Later, she asked Dumbledore for a definition of magic. The question captured Harry's attention. He couldn't recall hearing a simple definition offered even once during his five years of studies. After five minutes, he understood why. None of the fully qualified wizards seated in the circle offered the same definition, and there was surprisingly little agreement amongst them.

Dumbledore's explanation was a single sentence, which set off much of the fray: "Magic is the art and science of causing change by the selective application of will." He offered no qualification, and simply allowed the arguments to run their course. Harry was sure that Dumbledore had been looking at him when he spoke the sentence, and it was the only morsel from the debate that stuck with him.

After a long while, fatigue began to creep up on Harry, and the number of people in the circle diminished one by one. Eventually, their number was reduced to six: Dumbledore, Lupin, Snape and Ron, in addition to Heather and himself. It was Snape's continuous observation of Heather that kept Harry awake. The staring was so obvious and so cold that Harry began to plot a series of hexes.

The fire waned, and Heather sat forward in her chair. "So... I guess you should explain why I'm not one of you," she said heavily. All went silent except the ebb and flow of the sea. After a long pause, she added, "Ron and Ginny and Bill are all related. I'm guessing this runs in families. Does it skip generations, or something?"

Lupin sighed heavily. "I think this is something that should be discussed in the presence of your mother," he said.

"You'd be referring to Shona?" Heather snapped. "She carried me for nine months. That doesn't make her my mother, anymore than your bit makes you my father."



Snape chortled under his breath. Heather glared at him. "As for you, Mister...?"

"Snape," he said smoothly. "Professor Severus Snape. I am an associate of Professor Dumbledore."

"As for you, Mister Snape, I've had quite enough of your staring," she seethed. Snape faintly smiled in response.

"You rightly observe that magical ability is an inherited trait," Dumbledore said.

"Albus, I don't think –" Lupin started.

"Remus, the young lady asked a question, and we did agree to answer questions," Dumbledore chided him. "Some of the more delicate nuances can be tabled until later, if you wish."

"Go on," Heather urged Dumbledore.

"Remus is a wizard. The majority of offspring between wizards or witches and Muggles manifest magical ability. Some do not," Dumbledore explained. "It is possible for the offspring of two non-magical people – two Muggles – to manifest magical abilities; Harry's friend Miss Granger is such a person. Some in our world believe that Muggle-born wizards and witches must inevitably have persons in their heritage with latent ability. Blood ties and purity are complicated and inflammatory issues in the wizarding world. The pureblooded – those with no apparent Muggle ancestry – often look down on those with Muggle relations, even if they are several generations past. Harry's mother was a Muggle-born witch; he is therefore considered a half-blood. If you were a witch, you would also be considered a half-blood –"

Heather rolled her eyes. "But I'm not, of course."

"It is possible, but unlikely," Dumbledore said. "If you possessed sufficient magical ability to be trained as a witch, then you should have appeared in our registry at Hogwarts at some point prior to your eleventh birthday."

Snape said, "I believe it is more than a possibility. The young lady is hiding something."

Heather bristled. "You weren't just staring, were you? What were you doing? I felt something, something I didn't like very much."

Harry sat forward in his chair, suddenly very much awake. "Were you mucking around in her mind, Snape?" he hissed.

Dumbledore looked as if he was about to correct Harry, but instead he turned to Snape. "You are falling into a pattern of considerable impoliteness where Legilimency is concerned. You shall correct this pattern, or it shall be corrected for you," he warned. "Is that clear, Severus?"

Snape took a sudden interest in his shoes, but somehow managed to look haughty doing it. "Yes, Headmaster," he said, "but she is hiding something. The very fact that she is capable of hiding it from me suggests that she is not a Muggle."

"It is not an either-or proposition," Dumbledore said mysteriously. He turned his attention to Heather. "If you were a witch, you would almost certainly know by the age of seventeen. I doubt that you could easily conceal accidental use of magical powers. Tell me, Miss Magruder, are you a witch?"

Heather lowered her head. "Stop that!" she said.

"What is it that you wish me to stop?" Dumbledore asked calmly.

"Whatever it was that you were doing," she snapped. "I felt something again... something strange."

"I did nothing," Dumbledore insisted.

Heather looked at him intently. "You're lying," she said.

"I did nothing," Dumbledore repeated.

Heather said nothing for a moment, then insisted, "I... still think you're lying. I'm sorry, but I just know."

Dumbledore recovered the customary twinkle in his eye. "How very curious," he remarked. "Remus, I believe she should be properly evaluated."

Lupin's lips grew very thin. "This is neither the time nor the place. Her mother has a right to exercise a say in this, and I'll see that honoured, even though it shall require a meeting – a meeting that is not likely to be pleasant," he said. "In the meantime, young lady, you have no business being out in the dead of night, and it would be best if you would refrain from further contact with Harry while this is all sorted out."

Heather's eyes narrowed. "I'm sorry, what did you say?"

"I want you to stay away from Harry for the time being," Lupin said firmly. "It's not safe, for either of you."

"I see," Heather said matter-of-factly. "And I should listen to you because...?"

"Because you lack a grasp of the situation in which you presently find yourself," Lupin said firmly. "I daresay that your mother would prefer I keep you from getting yourself hurt, or worse."

"We're finished here," Heather said coldly, and stood.

Harry gauged Lupin's expression for a moment, and then stood with her. "Would you like to go home?" he asked her.

"I'll get there on my own," she said flatly.

Harry followed her up the switchback to the top of cliff anyway, to be certain she didn't fall in the dark if nothing else.

She stopped near the top, turned, and bore down on him with an icy stare. "Are you sorry you didn't tell me before?"

Harry couldn't meet her eyes. "I wish you didn't have to know."

"Don't look away from me," she snapped. "Are you sorry?"

"If I had told you, would you have believed me?" Harry asked. Heather's downcast expression gave a clear answer.

"This isn't easy for me," Harry said. "I should have never come back to L'Oiseau Chanteur after I met you. I kept coming back anyway. Now it's all fallen apart. I'm sorry I've dragged you into this."

"I believe you," she said.

"Remus is right. You should stay away from me. You should stay away from him, as well. You should run away from here, and forget you ever met any of us," Harry said bitterly.

"Remus can sod off," Heather spat. "I have enough minders of my own. I don't need another."

Harry felt a pang of anger. "Hold on here... I'm the one saying you should stay away. What, I can't think for myself – is that it?"

"I'm not having this conversation right now," Heather fumed. "I've had enough for one day."

"Fine," Harry snapped. "Walk five miles in the dark, then. If you come to your senses, then I'll give you a lift."

"There's a brilliant idea," she sneered, "seeing as the last ride home ended so well."

"Then we'll find you a room for the night!" Harry barked in exasperation. He brushed past her, and stomped to the top of the cliffs.

A few moments later, he felt a hand on his shoulder. "I don't want to fight," she said. "It's just... you have to admit that it's been one hell of a day."

“I just wanted to get away from it for a while,” Harry sighed. “Just a month, one month.”

“Um... Harry? Were you expecting anyone?” Heather asked.

Harry’s brow furrowed. “What, at this hour?”

Heather pointed into the distance. “Those lights... I think they’re on your lane, not on the roadway.”

Harry squinted into the distance. “I can’t tell – they’re moving fast, though.”

Grass crunched behind them. Harry whirled around.

“Easy, Harry,” Bill Weasley said. “I was just watching that motorcar coming up the drive. I don’t think it’s slowing down.”

Harry felt for his wand. He slipped it into his sleeve, and started briskly toward the tower.

“Do you think dashing toward a speeding motorcar is wise?” Bill asked after him. Harry paid no mind, and Heather ran to keep up.

“Is it going to ram the bloody wall?” Harry wondered aloud, and he sped up to a fast jog.

Heather ran along beside him. The motorcar veered around the side of the wall, and bore down on Odd Lovegood’s van. She stopped abruptly, and shouted, “What in the hell is she doing?”

The silver car tore along the side of Mr. Lovegood’s van. The sound of grinding metal made the hair on Harry’s neck stand at attention. The motorcar fishtailed, and spun until it caught the wall; the boot crumpled deeply from the impact. The front left quarter was mangled from the first impact, and the van was creased along its entire length.

Heather ran toward the car, through stirred-up clouds of dust and dirt. “You’re a lunatic!” she hollered.

The driver's door flung open. "I knew yeh'd be here... what'd I tell yeh? Stay away from him, I say! What'da yeh do? Straight here! I dinnae think I gave birth to a tart!" Shona bellowed.

Heather forcefully grabbed Shona's arm. "Look at what you did to that van! What were you thinking?"

Shona pulled her arm free and pushed Heather back. She waved her hand dismissively at the van. "So? They wiggle their fingers and poof! Fixed!" She laughed too hard, then coughed and gagged.

Heather began, "You knew...?" but then her nose wrinkled. "God, you smell like a pub! You're pissed!"

Shona stumbled away from Heather. "Don't yeh be judgin' me!" she moaned. "I'm nah here ta listen, I'm here ta howl at the moon!" She laughed again, a dark and bitter laugh.

"Yeh couldn't leave me alone, could yeh!" Shona shrieked at the tower. "Yer dead, an yeh couldn't leave it! The boy's not yours, is he, Black? I stared at that effin' picture all effin' day! I should-a ripped it up – years ago! I should-a... should-a... ripped it up..." She dropped to her knees. "He's Jimmy's boy, isn't he? I should-a seen it, but I dinnae want to see it. I dinnae want any of this!" She struggled to her feet. Heather tried to help her, but Shona flailed at her.

"I'm not here ta talk ta you!" she boomed, and knocked Heather off her feet. She rushed at the wall and pounded against the stone with the sides of her balled fists. "Yer all dead, aren't yeh? All of yeh! Why?"

The black door in the wall opened slightly. Bill called out, "Stay inside!" He said to Harry, "We should put a stop to this. She's going to hurt herself, or someone else."

Bill levelled his wand, but Harry quickly shoved it aside; "Too late," he said.

Ginny stood beside Shona. "Can we help you? Are you hurt?" she asked gently.

Shona pointed, and her hand shook. "L-Lily? Oh my God... LILY!" Before Ginny could react, Shona attempted to wrap her in a desperate hug. She succeeded partly, but slid downward until she was huddled at Ginny's feet.

"I cannae believe it – so young! M-magic!" Shona cried.

Harry muttered to Bill, "Get Remus, for Merlin's sake!"

"I'm on it," Bill said, and then disappeared.

Harry closed in very slowly, afraid of startling Shona if she were to look his way. Ginny caught his eye; she looked concerned, but not afraid. She carefully knelt. "Do... do you think I'm Lily Potter?" Ginny asked.

Shona slowly lifted her head. "Lily... Potter? Och, of course... Lily – Potter... should-a known... so yer who?"

Ginny said, "I'm a friend of Harry's from school. Harry's mum... she isn't here. She's, erm... she's dead."

"Of course she's dead," Shona slurred, "Lily's dead, so Jimmy's surely dead..." She laughed strangely. "Sirius Black is DEAD. Remus is... dead... Remus... can't think about... no..." She swatted at the stone wall. "Yer all dead! Well... good riddance! Yeh ruined my effin' life!" She stopped pounding, and began to cry. "Why dinnae yeh just tell me the truth, Remus? Why?" she whispered hoarsely.

"Are you talking about Remus Lupin?" Ginny asked gently. "He isn't dead."

Shona froze. "D-don't yeh toy with me," she warned. "I saw... I watched them, whatever they were... they killed him... they HATED him..." She stared at Ginny. Her eyes were bloodshot and brimmed with tears. "He couldna help it... no one would choose... it's just how he was... wasn't it? I wake up screaming sometimes... it's always there... in the dark... they chained him, they beat him...an they killed

him. I've played it over and over... he was tryin' ta get at them, and they threw me in the way. He dinnae mean ta scratch me up."

Ginny asked nervously, "Um... scratched you up? You mean that Professor Lupin... scratched you?"

Shona didn't seem to hear her. "I forgave him, yeh know? Sat right on that beach down there, four, five years ago now. Climbed the stack, fer old times. He should-a told me. I suppose he dinnae trust me... I dunno."

Heather carefully approached. "Ginny's right. Remus Lupin isn't dead. I was talking to him a few minutes ago."

Shona laughed hoarsely. "An yeh thought I was pissed! Was the boy tryin' ta drink his way inta yer breeks, then? Naw, I suppose not – Jimmy wasn't like that. Black, though, there was a hound... the pure shite that poured from his mouth..."

Ron was outside now, standing in his nightclothes next to Dumbledore, who had appeared silently. Mr. Lovegood gaped at his crumpled van; Mr. Tonks had his hand clamped firmly over Mr. Lovegood's mouth, which muffled the moaning.

Harry said, "Remus is alive, Shona. He thought you were dead."

Shona stared at him for a moment, and then cackled, "Oh, that's rich... that's a corker, boy!"

Lupin emerged from the darkness. "I saw you fall..." his shaky voice called out.

Shona recoiled. "Trick! It's a trick!" she snarled at Harry. "Stop it! Even Black wouldna done this!"

"It's no trick," Lupin said. His voice still shook. "They didn't kill me. For quite some time, people thought that I might have killed you."

Shona stumbled to her feet. "Cheap effin' wine... should-a known better." She edged toward Lupin. "You aren't here," she said, jabbing



her finger unsteadily toward him, “an I’ll prove it.” She ducked her head like a bull, and charged straight into Lupin, who barely had time to react. He managed to save them both from falling flat, but struck the side of his head against the ground.

“Was that really necessary?” Lupin grumbled. Harry wasn’t sure who wobbled more, as Lupin and Shona dragged each other to their feet.

“It IS you!” Shona shrieked. “Yeh son-of-a-bitch!” She pounded on him just as she had pounded on the stone wall. Lupin managed to bring his arms up to afford some protection, but stood there and took the pummelling. She stopped pounding on him, and he cautiously lowered his arms. She swung at him again, and missed, then pressed into him and beat against his chest with her fists, her nails piercing the still night. Harry gaped at them, and Heather looked to be in shock.

Shona released Lupin, and snarled, “I’m so angry with yeh, I can’t see straight!” She grabbed him roughly by the hair and devoured his mouth.

When she let up, Lupin gasped for air. “You can’t see straight because you’ve been drinking petrol!” he choked. “It’s time for you to sober up, and... and then we have a lot to discuss.” He looked to Harry, with desperation in his eyes. “Harry... would you be put out if I borrowed... you know? I think a bit of distance would be for the best.”

Harry nodded, unable to summon a single word.

\* \* \* \* \*

Harry was beginning to read Dumbledore, in small ways. Some were obvious – a twinkling eye was generally good but sometimes a bit mischievous; an arched eyebrow said that something was amiss; and he was sometimes snappish when very tired. Some were less obvious, like the different ways that he showed impatience.

Dumbledore stood at the massive range in the first-floor kitchen. He had put a stockpot of water on a burner, with the avowed intention of making mass amounts of hot chocolate. Heather had questioned hot

chocolate on a relatively warm night but she relented. Dumbledore clearly understood how to use the gas burners, but kept fiddling with the height of the flames.

At the kitchen table, Bill and Heather were swapping impressions of various countries. Tonks looked on serenely, disinterested and exhausted. Ginny sat next to Heather and eagerly took in each new bit of information. Ron struggled to keep his eyes open.

Harry excused himself to the range. "Muggles have a saying about watching pots," he said quietly to Dumbledore. "Aunt Petunia used to say it."

Dumbledore laughed softly. "'A watched pot never boils' is what you recall. This is an instance where an aphorism proves itself true, I fear."

"That's quite a lot of water to heat," Harry said, with his back turned to the kitchen table. "An ordinary flame could take half an hour to raise a boil."

Dumbledore fiddled with the flame height again, and said, "I do hope that Remus is faring well. I perfectly understand his insistence on handling the matter alone and in his own fashion, and he is a master of delicacy when he applies himself..."

"However...?" Harry ventured.

Dumbledore smiled faintly. "If you have learned nothing else this summer, you must surely know that affairs of the heart are complicated and not without pain."

Mr. Lovegood clapped Harry on the shoulder. "Learning about love, are we?" he said in normal voice. "Well, that's an honest pursuit at your age? My Luna's certainly prepossessed with it —"

Harry quickly cut in, before Mr. Lovegood could provide any details. He reckoned that Ron might prove the cognivores wrong by dying right there in the kitchen, were Mr. Lovegood to bring up Luna's dear 'Ronald'. "I get it," he said to Dumbledore. "Love hurts."

“Love also heals,” Dumbledore returned. “Love is beautiful, passionate, glorious, jealous, spiteful... it is anticipation and release... it is tender, and sometimes savage... and yes, there are times when it hurts, Harry – when it is so painful that one can scarcely breathe.”

“Why bother, then?” Harry groused. “Why choose to hurt, or be hurt? It always ends badly, anyway...”

Dumbledore arched an eyebrow. “Explain yourself, Harry.”

Mr. Lovegood said, “Dumbledore, I believe I’m better suited to handle this. Allow me.” Dumbledore’s face froze. That must be bad, Harry noted to himself.

Mr. Lovegood took no notice. “You’ve been surrounded by death, obviously. I understand something of what that’s like. I could see the Thestrals, you know, when I was a student. Is that why you believe love ends badly – because people die?”

Harry felt jumbled inside. It was like Mr. Lovegood had turned up the flame beneath him, and now he was about to boil over. “I can’t talk about this,” he said; “I just can’t.”

Mr. Lovegood’s voice rose, and Harry was acutely aware that every eye in the room was upon them. “You’re wrong, Harry. Everyone dies, sooner or later. Is it better to die unloved and unloving? I don’t mean romance; I’m talking about love. There are important differences between the two.” He sighed. “I lost my wife nine years ago. I have had a drunken phase, a second-guessing phase, and a self-destructive phase... I was sacked, I abandoned our friends, and I blamed everyone around me for what happened to her... Luna suffered for it, and I regret that terribly. There’s one thing I never did. I never regretted for a second that I loved Gaia, or that she loved me – not for one second. What we had... it’s enough to carry me for the rest of my life. Is that a bad end? I don’t believe so. If I hadn’t had Gaia, I wouldn’t have Luna, and I would have nothing.”

"I believe your question was 'why bother?'" Mr. Lovegood said. "Have you ever met anyone who didn't bother? Think about that, and you might find your own answer." He yawned loudly. "I'm knackered. I think that there may be fezziwigs nesting in your Great Hall. It will surely take most of the day to lure them outdoors. Nasty things, fezziwigs." He ambled toward the hallway.

"Sir? I'm sorry about your van. I'll make good on it, I promise," Heather offered.

Mr. Lovegood shrugged. "No one was hurt. It's just a thing. Things aren't all that important." He turned to Harry. "The Beatles were right about love, you know."

Dumbledore frowned. "I fail to see what insects have to do with the question at hand."

Mr. Lovegood shook his head. "Dumbledore, only you could miss an entire decade. Good night, all." His voice echoed in loud off-key song from the hallway. "All you need is love, all you need is love; all you need is love, all you need is love; all you need is love, love; love is all you need!"

Bill piped up, "Sir... um, the Beatles were..."

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled. "I know very well who the Beatles were. Mister Lovegood is simply too much. Fezziwigs... good heavens."

"Um... what's a fezziwig?" Heather asked.

"Precisely," laughed Dumbledore.

Ron laughed and said, "We sure know where Luna gets it!" Ginny smacked his arm in response.

Harry cleared his throat. "I'm off to see how Remus is getting along," he said.

"You should not interfere. It is, after all, a private matter," Dumbledore said.

"I just want to be sure they haven't destroyed... erm... anything important," Harry said, barely catching himself. "Heather?"

"I'm too tired," she said. "I can stand the suspense until morning... er, I mean later this morning. Is there, you know, anywhere that I can catch some sleep? Perhaps there's a spare bed in the spaceship?" She grinned, and even Harry laughed this time.

"Harry's bedchamber is vacant, I believe," Dumbledore said.

Harry said, "Take it. I've never even seen it."

"I'll show you upstairs," Ginny offered.

As she passed, Heather muttered to Harry, "So... a bedchamber. Sounds inviting. How big is the bed, I wonder?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Tease," he muttered.

At the foot of the stairs, she turned to Harry. "Thank you," she said.

"For what?" he asked. "For mucking up your life? I mean, it hasn't been a banner day."

"For Remus," she said, "even if he isn't what I imagined."

He said, "I thought you said he didn't tell you...?"

Heather smiled a tired smile before heading up the stairs. "I just know," she said.

\* \* \* \* \*

As Harry drew close to the bothy, the hairs on the back of his neck stood up. He quietly Disillusioned himself, and silenced the crunching grass beneath his feet. Someone was there, he was certain. He could almost feel them. He reacted just as he felt a breath on the back of his hair, but too late. An invisible arm wrapped around his neck. Harry flailed around, trying to grab anything that he could. Just as the

pressure on his neck made him light-headed, he was flung forward. As he fell, he angled his wand arm backward, and muttered, "Everbero." He heard a satisfying thud, just before he made his own thud against the hard ground.

As Harry tried to stand, his wand wouldn't budge. In the same instant, he realised that his invisible attacker was probably standing on it. He whipped around and toppled his attacker. When he reached for his wand, it flew away from him. He saw a body-sized swath of rippling grass, and dove. His attacker let out a guttural oomph! but countered with a slapping spell. By the time he recovered, Harry had been pounced upon.

"Give up yet, Potter?" an invisible voice barked.

Harry wrestled with his attacker. He felt a smooth head, and all became clear. He barked out the warming charm, and Shackbolt howled. Once free, Harry dove for his wand. He waved away the illusion that concealed his attacker, and called out, "Stupefy!" Shackbolt countered with a shield.

"Shame on me for forgetting that you don't always need a wand," Shackbolt said. "Not bad, but I think the holiday has softened you."

Harry stood slowly, maintaining his wand at the ready. "Any other surprises?" he snapped.

"If I told you, then they wouldn't be surprises," Shackbolt said with a smirk.

Harry remained wary. "I just came to see if Remus was still alive," he said.

Shackbolt arched an eyebrow. "I haven't seen him since I left the beach. I understand that there was quite a ruckus earlier. Did he go for a walk?" Harry stopped for a moment before he realised that Shackbolt was staring directly at the bothy but didn't see it.

"I thought he had. I guess not," Harry said. "You have the watch tonight, then?"

Shacklebolt nodded. "Dumbledore asked me to take it in his stead."

Harry nodded. He hesitated, not sure what to say next other than, "Well... guess I'll be going back."

"Your training resumes today," Shacklebolt said. "Since you have decided that nights are not for sleeping, we'll use the afternoons. Have you been reading?"

"No," admitted Harry.

"I noticed that some of the library from Grimmauld Place is duplicated here," Shacklebolt said. "Take a pass through the titles and find something worthwhile. We'll begin with the assignment I gave you."

Harry said, "Assignment...?"

"Conveniently forgotten, I see," Shacklebolt said. "I asked you to review your experiences with wandless magic, and document both the circumstances and the state of your emotions. Since you obviously have written nothing, an oral presentation will suffice. We'll also review the incident at the Grangers' home."

"Is that necessary?" Harry grumbled.

Shacklebolt nodded slowly. "I expected you'd resist that. It's important to consider what happened, and why it happened. We will both benefit. I will be better able to evaluate your needs, and you will gain some perspective."

"Fine, then," Harry snarled. He turned toward the tower.

"Harry..." Shacklebolt said.

Harry turned, surprised at hearing his first name.

Shacklebolt looked uneasy. He cleared his throat. "I know why it's so important to train you. Dumbledore didn't say anything to me; it wasn't necessary. After what has happened, after what I've seen, it's

painfully obvious who and what you are. At the tower, when I expressed my concerns about consorting with Muggles... Harry, my job is to give you the best chance of surviving what lies ahead. I didn't mean to suggest that you wall yourself off from everyone. I just think you need to be selective. You need to think carefully about how the people in your life can help you do what must be done."

Harry was too tired to retort. "Tomorrow, then," he said.

"Tomorrow," Shacklebolt confirmed. "One o'clock. The Great Hall in the tower should be an excellent space for our purposes."

Harry walked toward the tower without looking back. All was quiet. He flopped onto the plush couch in one corner of the Great Hall, and settled in. His sleep was unsettled, a jumble of shouting and singing and spaceships and a dark sky with brilliant stars and a sun-dappled whitewashed building on a high hill that overlooked an azure sea.



## Chapter Twenty-four

### IF THERE BE MONSTERS, THEY BE US

August 20, 1996

Even closed, Harry's eyes felt dry. How strange, he thought, with the sea so close... the glittering azure sea, and a fresh breeze that smelled of salt and olives and flowers and something else sweet and familiar but unnamed... what? Something baking?

He opened his eyes. They felt encrusted with sand. He half-expected to see a patio bounded by trees overlooking the ocean. Instead, the dining table in the Great Hall of the tower sat before him. He moved and he winced; the couch was soft but too short for sleeping. By the height of the sun, he judged that it was still early. Definitely something baking, he decided.

He stumbled down the stairs and into the kitchen. All six burners on the range top were going, something was indeed baking on the open hearth, both prep tables were covered with bowls and plates and food from the larder, and Shona was chopping like a madwoman. Her hair was in disarray, and it dawned on Harry that she was wearing one of his running suits – she had apparently spent the whole night in the bothy. She looked up furtively and returned her attention to the chopping. “Good mornin’, Harry,” she muttered.

“Uh... good morning,” he returned warily. “This is, erm, quite a feast you have going.”

“Least I could do after stirring up all yer guests last night,” she said briskly. “Least I could do.”

“Can I help?” he asked.

She stopped the chopping. “I admit I’m spoilt with a sous chef an’ a runner. Remus wasn’t sure about the numbers – would I be feedin’ twelve or fourteen?”

Harry shrugged. "That depends a bit on who's around. It's somewhere in there, I think."

Shona said, "Och, close enough. We'll see whether all that watchin' in my kitchen did yeh any good." She slipped into a commanding tone and he played along. She wasn't terribly critical of him, so he presumed that he was managing more or less as she expected.

When the meal was nearly ready to be served and Harry had moved several dishes into the dumbwaiter, he asked Shona if she needed anything else, or if he should gather everyone to the dining table in the hall. She didn't respond; her attention never shifted from the work.

"Shona?" he said quietly.

Her eyes welled up – something Harry absolutely didn't expect. "This was the only normal thing ta be done," she said hoarsely. "I needed ta do somethin' normal."

"I'm sure everyone will appreciate it," he offered. "It'll be the best meal anyone here's had for a while."

She chuckled for a moment, even as tears trickled down her cheeks. "It's all I know to do," she said. "Remus... he told me a lot last night. Not everythin', I suppose, but enough. Madness, all of it." She carved sausages loudly, banging the cleaver hard. "God, they've been tryin' ta kill yeh for fifteen years! How do yeh stand it?"

"It's all I know to do," he said quietly.

"That's not right," she said.

It took Harry a while to decide what to say. "I'm sure whatever happened to you wasn't right, either."

The cleaver slipped out of Shona's hand and clattered against the tabletop. She said, "I didn't know if they were hunting me, so I ran. I didn't know whether Heather was like me or like Remus, so I gave her up. I gave up my own child because I was afraid. Anything that came of that was my doin', and mine alone." She picked up the

cleaver, and waved it in Harry's general direction. "This thing tried ta kill yeh when yeh were a baby. There's no choice in that. It's – not – right."

Harry immediately thought of several questions. He wasn't about to ask them and he certainly wasn't about to argue with her, especially with a chef's cleaver in her hand. He changed the subject. "Where's Remus?"

"Talkin' to the old man," she said dejectedly. "Tryin' ta figure out how best ta explain the rest to her..." She set down the cleaver, and added, "...like it or not."

Harry said, "You don't like it, right?"

"Yeh don't think I want ta drag her into this mess, do yeh?" Shona asked.

"Erm... it might be a bit late for worries," Harry suggested.

"Black told me that yeh have ways ta make people forget. She'd forget all of yeh, if it were up ta me," Shona growled.

Harry said defensively, "In our world, you're an adult at seventeen. If she's Remus' daughter, then it's up to her."

Shona glared at him. "I don't give a damn about your world. Truth is, I gave up the right ta make her choices, a long time ago. I'll tell her ta know Remus an' stay away from the rest of yeh. She'll know the cost, if I have anythin' ta say about it. After that, it's her cross ta bear." She plated the sausages and snapped, "Breakfast is served."

At the table, Shona was composed. The conversation drifted entirely around and past the late night events. Heather seemed too chipper and laughed a bit too loudly. She pointedly avoided Harry. Harry couldn't bring himself to sit there and pretend that everything was somehow all right. Luna had remained in her room. Harry fixed a plate for her, excused himself, and climbed the spiralling stairs to the garret.

Luna was once again staring out the window. "Good morning, Harry," she said without looking.

Harry held out the plate. "I brought you some food. How are you?"

"I am tired. I am tired of being tired," said Luna. "How are you?"

"Hiding," he said quickly.

Luna chuckled softly. "Ginny told me about last night's events in vivid detail. I would have preferred that she simply quiet herself and go to sleep, but she was unstoppable. Your friend is the daughter of Professor Lupin, then?"

"It appears that way," Harry said.

"A most interesting summer, indeed." Luna remarked. "To discover friendship in the midst of horror is ironic. I certainly would not have expected Hermione Granger to become friendly with me. Hermione will have a difficult time upon returning, I fear. She shall need her friends."

Harry felt a sudden sense of dread. "Why... why 'upon returning'? Why will she have a difficult time then?"

"I am sure that Hermione will explain when she returns," Luna said distantly, and she turned back to the window.

"Don't turn away! What was that supposed to mean?" Harry demanded.

Ginny entered the room. "That was a smashing breakfast. Heather's mum certainly can cook... what's going on? Am I interrupting something?"

Luna said, "I was simply telling Harry that I fear Hermione will have a difficult time upon returning."

Ginny quickly closed the door behind her. "Cast a silencing charm," she said to Harry.

Harry crossed his arms. "Why should I? More secrets? You're hiding something from me... she's not going to come back, is she?" Ginny's face was a blank mask.

"What causes you to think that, Harry?" Luna asked.

"Hermione's reasonable, and so are her parents. Walking away would be the reasonable thing to do," he said.

"I wouldn't say she was reasonable when she left," Ginny said sadly. "I wish I could just talk to her. I can't even send an owl."

Harry jumped inside at the word 'owl'. "Why not? Where is she?" he asked.

"I can't tell you," Ginny answered. "Mum would have known, but she had a row with Hermione's mum."

"She would have known? And what do you mean, 'a row'?" Harry asked.

"They had a row," Ginny said evenly.

Harry saw that Ginny was measuring her words; she said that she couldn't tell him where Hermione and her parents were, instead of saying that she didn't know where they were. He wondered whether she could be trusted at all. He said curtly, "Excuse me; I start training again today," and flung open the door.

Ginny said, "Harry... I am sorry."

He sneered, "Goodness, I can't imagine what you'd have to be sorry about!"

"I... hey! What's that supposed to mean?" Ginny shot back.

"Forget it," Harry grumbled as he stormed down the stairs. He brushed past Tonks, who called after him about something, but he

didn't care. He burst out of the tower, and nearly ran into Dumbledore and Remus, who were walking in the courtyard.

"Harry? What is wrong?" Dumbledore asked.

"Not now," Harry snapped, and continued toward the black oaken door.

"Come here – that was uncalled for," Remus demanded.

He threw open the black door, and ran toward the bothy. He didn't stop until he reached his bedroom; the need to see Hermione's picture drove him there. "I wish you were here," he sighed as if she could hear him. The next thing he heard was insistent pounding on the outer door. He stumbled to the living room, gathered up his wand, and flung open the door.

"What?" he barked.

Heather looked at him in horror, and took an immediate step backward. "I'm... sorry," she said quietly. "I'll just..." She pointed toward the tower, and backed further away.

Harry said, "Heather! I didn't mean to shout... I thought you were someone else." He hesitated. "Heather? What's wrong? What's happened?"

Heather looked around. "I expected Shona would chase after me. After what she said... she'd have kittens if I came in."

"You'll be coming in, then?" Harry asked with a smirk.

Heather allowed herself a wry smile. "I don't know whether I should trust you, but at least you do understand me," she said as she passed through the door.

Her eyes searched the living area. She headed directly for the kitchen counter, and sifted through the pile of photographs. "Shona said she ran because she was afraid. She was afraid of more than just the... you know, of what you can do..."

"You can use the word 'magic', Heather. That's what it's called," Harry said.

"Whatever. She was afraid of more than just... magic. Something happened," Heather said. "They were both dancing around it, whatever it was, other than Remus admitting that he thought she was dead... the point being, she ran away. He said he would have been part of my life if he'd known about me. He said he wants to be part of my life now, if I'll have him, and then he started in on having me evaluated or whatever. Anyway, I had to tell him to sod off again."

"What, for wanting you evaluated?" Harry asked.

Heather groaned. "Isn't it obvious? Remus is dangerous as well, or at least he was, but that didn't prevent him from offering to hang about. After that, he has the nerve to steer me off of you?" She shook her head. "One-hundred-percent pure shite, all of it; I'm not about to listen to him."

"Will you listen to me, then?" Harry said. "He's right, and I meant what I said last night. You should stay as far from me as you can." He added weakly, "You should probably go now."

"No," said Heather, "and I'm not going to budge from this couch until you tell me why I should stay away – all of it."

Harry didn't want to say anything, but the words churned inside him. Once he let them loose, he couldn't stop. "Everything I told you about me, about my parents and what happened to them, about me being a target, was all true... it just wasn't the whole truth. You want to know why you should stay away? Fine – here's the whole truth. The person trying to kill me is called Voldemort."

"You said that name last night, like it was a joke," Heather recalled.

"Well, he's no joke. He's a wizard, a very powerful and very evil one. He has followers called Death Eaters, and they're as evil as he is. When Voldemort killed my parents, he killed them with a curse. It's the only curse that can't be blocked; if it strikes you, you're dead. He

used it on me but I didn't die, which is impossible. Somehow it bounced back at him. I ended up with this scar..." He flipped back his bangs and scowled.

"Voldemort disappeared, and everyone thought he was dead. He wasn't." His bangs fell back across his forehead. "In our world, people call me the Boy-Who-Lived; charming, isn't it? I didn't know any of this until I turned eleven and went to Hogwarts – that's my school. Dumbledore packed me off to live with my mother's sister and her horrid git of a husband. I slept in a cupboard under the stairs for ten years... let's leave it at that. I spent my Christmases at Hogwarts, and as much of my summers with the Weasleys as I could. During my first year at Hogwarts, Voldemort came back. A year ago, I duelled with him. He... he killed a schoolmate of mine, and I barely escaped. He keeps getting stronger and he's set on killing me."

He sighed. "In our world, I'm famous – all because a curse bounced off my head! I'm in the papers constantly. One day I'm the saviour of the world; the next day I'm a demon. Almost no one believed that Voldemort was back, until this summer. People thought I was crazy, you know, that it was some kind of delayed madness or something. Deep down, no one wanted to believe it. I can't really blame them for that."

Part of Harry wanted to stop, but something possessed him to continue. "I have this connection with him. Maybe it has something to do with the scar – I don't know. I can see what he sees sometimes, or hear what he hears. It was especially bad last year. It would happen at night, in my dreams. I could have blocked it out, but I didn't... I wasn't taught properly, but I think I knew how. Part of me didn't care. I let him in and he tricked me, to try and bring him something he wanted, something only I could get. I managed to get Sirius Black killed because of it, because I didn't learn... Tonks nearly died... Ron and Hermione were badly hurt... Ginny and Luna and Neville could have been... all because I was stupid!"

Harry closed his eyes to compose himself, but that left him in the darkness of the Department of Mysteries... the Veil was there, and his eyes snapped open. He pressed on, "Sirius had a will, and he was... gods, I wouldn't know where to start. In the end, I ended up



emancipated on my birthday. I turned up in the papers even more. In Teen Witch Weekly –”

Heather laughed nervously, which startled Harry. “I’m sorry,” she said. “It’s just... Teen Witch Weekly? What’s that about – all the hot magical boys?”

“More or less. I’m sure Ron would love to show you his clippings,” Harry grunted.

Heather’s eyes widened. “I was joking... sorry, it’s a lot to take in.” She fidgeted. “I take it you turned up in this Teen Witch Weekly.”

Harry took a deep breath. “They printed something about my supposed love life. It connected a few girls with me – Luna and Ginny, and Hermione, and some other schoolmates.” Heather closely scrutinized him, and he looked away. “Voldemort got inside my head again – I didn’t even know he was there this time,” he admitted. “He wanted to find out who was really important to me, and...” His fists balled. “...and he went after them... just to hurt me. Luna – I don’t know if you met Luna, but she’s here...”

Heather nodded. “Ginny introduced me to her. She seems like a very nice girl. Strange eyes, though.”

“She’s nice, all right. She’s one of the bravest people I know. One of Voldemort’s Death Eaters...” Harry squeezed his fists tightly, and hoped that he could hold himself together. “...the same one who killed Sirius...” He shook. “...cut Luna’s throat.” Heather recoiled.

Harry waited until his shaking stopped, and then continued, “Right after that, a group of Death Eaters attacked us at Hermione’s house –”

“And now it all comes together,” Heather whispered.

Harry nodded. “Voldemort came. He...” The anger rushed through him in waves; with each wave, he squeezed his hands again. “...he had her tortured, and he attacked her himself. He told me...” Harry’s throat tightened, and his voice became anguished. “...he told me that

he was going to kill her, and that he'd spare everyone else in the room if I didn't move."

Heather covered her mouth with one hand and gripped the back of the couch with her other hand. Her eyes demanded that he finish.

Harry couldn't meet her eyes any more. He looked at his hands in his lap, and decided that he couldn't look at himself either. He steeled himself, and told it without emotion. "I couldn't let him do it. Ron's dad said they'd have just killed all of us anyway. He was probably right. I got loose, and I killed six of them."

"How?" Heather asked quietly.

"Why do you have to know that?" Harry demanded.

Her voice could barely be heard. "You got loose, so they had you locked up or something. You didn't have your stick, then."

Harry couldn't hold it in any longer. "I did it with my bare hands! Wizards who fight for a living were frightened of me! I tore apart six people with my bare hands!" He felt his eyes begin to moisten, but he was not about to break down in front of her; instead, he turned away. "I don't even know how I did it. I was completely out of control." She didn't say anything. They just sat there, for what seemed to Harry like hours.

He felt two hands rest on his back. "I'm not afraid of you," she said.

His laugh was bitter. "Then you're a nutter," he said.

She rubbed his back gently. "You're probably right," she said. "Are you ready to listen to me now?"

"Probably not," he said, but he turned back toward her.

Heather kept running one hand up and down his back. "When I came back here for holiday, I was looking for something that didn't exist. I wanted a nice-looking fellow who had never heard of me and wanted nothing... well, some kissing would have been nice. This is St. Ebb,

you know; all the boys worth having are taken or moved on. Then... here comes Harry. Definitely nice-looking – the black clothes, the motorbike... a bit flirty... obviously well-to-do... and decent to anyone and everyone.” She mussed his hair, and he smiled a pained smile. “Too good to be real – recently fallen to earth, for certain. Of course I didn’t plan on you being heir to the Blacks, I didn’t plan on stumbling across Remus, and I sure as hell didn’t plan on falling through the looking-glass!”

Harry muttered, “Sorry to disappoint you.”

Heather pressed harder into his back. Harry was distracted by it, but didn’t mind. She said, “I’m not disappointed. I like you, Harry, and I’m not afraid of you.”

“You should be,” Harry said.

“You kept some people from being killed, people you obviously care about – you saved their lives. You killed the bad guys along the way, and you’re tearing yourself apart over that. Tell me, would the bad guys have lost any sleep over killing you or your friends?” she asked. Harry reluctantly shook his head.

Heather pulled him into a hug. “I won’t pretend that I’m comfortable with all of this going on about magic. I... I have a lot of questions. That doesn’t mean I think you’re some kind of monster. You’re not. You’re a good person; I know that.”

“I just don’t want to see you hurt because you’re close to me,” Harry said.

“Good. Neither do I,” said Heather. She pulled back from him, and smiled.

“Erm... I have to ask... what’s this about kissing, then?” Harry asked with a smirk.

Heather shook her head and gave a wry smile. “Two days ago, I would have left your lips numb if you’d just asked. Something’s come between us.”

Harry sat up straight. "What? It isn't Remus, is it?"

"No, it's not... although I do feel like we're family in a strange way, with Remus being what he is to you. No, I mean your friend on the wall... this Hermione," said Heather.

Harry didn't care for the way Heather said Hermione's name. "What about her?" he asked defensively.

"I saw the look in your eyes when I asked about that picture. I may as well have left the room. Listening to you just now... don't be daft, Harry," Heather said.

"It's not like that," he said.

"What's it like, then?" she asked.

"I told you before – she's been my best friend for five years," he returned. "To see her like that... it ripped me in two; I won't deny it. She deserves better."

"I know you're holding out on me. Do you want me to trust you, or not?" Heather asked.

Harry swallowed and licked his lips. He felt suddenly dry. "I've watched people get together, you know, at school. It doesn't work out, and there are hard feelings, and... and I couldn't chance that. She's too important to me; I didn't want to make a bigger mess of things." He sighed deeply. "In the end, it wouldn't have mattered. After I... you know... did what I did... she couldn't even look at me. She was afraid of me – afraid. Now I find out that after I left to come here, she... well... she snapped."

Heather's eyebrows shot up. "Snapped? What do you mean, snapped?"

"You know... snapped, went spare. Ron's told me the most. He said she was curled up in the corner, babbling or something like that. She

and her parents left the country,” Harry said. “I just hope she’ll be my friend again, if she comes back at all.”

“Why are you sitting here?” Heather demanded.

Harry was puzzled. “What?”

Heather shook her head. “Do you even hear yourself when you talk? If she’s so important to you and she’s been hurt, then why are you sitting here?”

“I can’t,” Harry explained. “I don’t know where she is, and I wouldn’t know where to begin looking.” Although Ginny might be in on it, he thought. Then there was an insistent rapping, and both Harry and Heather turned to the open door.

“May we come in?” Lupin asked.

Harry looked to Heather, who shrugged. “If you like,” he said without really meaning it.

Shona followed Lupin inside. A few moments later, Dumbledore entered and closed the door. Shona and Lupin sat next to one another in the armchairs. Dumbledore conjured his own chair and Shona jumped in her seat at the sight. Heather tried not to appear intrigued but Harry knew better.

Shona tugged at the sleeve of the running suit she wore. “Er... borrowed this from yeh,” she said to Harry. “Return it tomorrow?”

“That’s fine,” Harry said.

Heather looked at Dumbledore suspiciously. “What are you doing here?”

“I asked Remus and Miss Malloch if I could join them. There is more that you must be told, and I thought that I might be of assistance,” he returned.

“Harry stays,” Heather said firmly.

"I had no intention of asking him to leave," Dumbledore said. "In fact, I suspect that you may derive value from his support. Remus?"

Lupin stiffened. "I've seen your idea of supporting Harry, and I object." He turned to Heather and added firmly, "I thought that my feelings on this were quite clear."

"And so were mine! Do I have to tell you again? Sod off!" Heather snapped.

"Heather, yeh'll not talk to yer father like that," Shona said.

Heather's eyes narrowed. "He's not my father, and you're not – my – mother," she snarled. "You gave birth to me, he's responsible, and that's the end of it. Anything else, you earn."

Dumbledore arched an eyebrow. "A more respectful tone would be in order," he said.

Heather didn't shout but her voice commanded the room. "Everyone except Harry has been lying through their effin' teeth at one time or another, and even he wasn't telling the whole truth before. Show me something to respect."

Lupin said, "Shona hasn't lied to you and I haven't lied to you. There's more to tell, and we would have told it if you hadn't run out on us. As for Harry, I'm sorry – I genuinely love Harry – but I'm right about this. You don't understand what you're doing."

"Don't I?" Heather said. She proceeded to recount Harry's story. Lupin's jaw dropped further with each detail, and even Dumbledore appeared surprised. "I know exactly what I'm doing," she finished.

"You were rather forthcoming, Harry. I do hope that you were not too forthcoming," Dumbledore said. "Miss Magruder seems to have made a strong impression upon you."

Harry said to Lupin, "I agreed with you, you know."

Shona lightly touched Lupin's arm. "Let him stay," she said. "I want to be done with this."

Lupin nodded reluctantly. "Albus... could you...?" he said nervously.

Dumbledore smiled. He reached into a small bag that he was carrying, and withdrew a nondescript wand. "Would you hold this, please?"

Heather eyed it suspiciously, and wrung her hands. "I'm not sure if I should. I don't know what I'm doing."

"There is nothing for you to do," Dumbledore assured her. "Simply hold the wand, and it will do the rest."

Heather apprehensively took the wand. For several seconds, it did nothing. Then it emitted a few tiny white sparks.

"Thank you," Dumbledore said, extending his hand. Heather gave him back the wand. "You do not appear to be a witch as we ordinarily define such," he declared. "That does not mean that you are without magic."

Lupin said, "That makes no sense. One has magical ability, or one does not."

"How is it that Arabella Figg performs household magic?" Dumbledore asked.

"I wasn't aware that she did," Lupin said. "I have no idea how she would perform any magic."

Dumbledore inclined his head and looked at Lupin over the top of his small silver spectacles. "Have you heard of the Kwikspell course?"

"It's little better than fraud," Lupin said. "It's a terrible thing to seed people with false hope."

"Algernon Croaker has studied squibs and wild talents, and he took a great interest in Kwikspell training. It seems to provide at least some enhancement for one-quarter to one-half of those who complete the

programme,” Dumbledore said. Lupin's eyebrows rose at that. Croaker – where have I heard that name? Harry wondered to himself.

Dumbledore continued, “So many of us believe that magical ability is controlled as if by a simple switch – turned one way, ability is granted; turned the other way, ability is withheld. I spent time in a Muggle house whilst away from Hogwarts last year. It was there that I encountered an apt metaphor for magical ability: the garden hosepipe. With the valve fully released, the flow of water is a torrent. With the valve scarcely opened, the flow is a mere trickle. It is still a flow of water, just the same.”

“So Squibs can actually be trained?” Lupin asked.

“Not in all cases, and not to a standard that we would accept as true wizardry or witchcraft. Arabella is perfectly capable of a wandless cleaning charm, but cannot manage a broom or a wand. Argus Filch can see the same magical manifestations as any wizard – how else could he negotiate the stairs at Hogwarts? Despite that, he can only cast one charm.”

“I’m sorry... did you say ‘Squibs’?” Heather asked.

“Just as non-magical persons are referred to as ‘Muggles’, non-magical offspring of wizards and witches are referred to as ‘Squibs’,” Dumbledore explained.

“A dud firework, am I?” Heather grumbled. “Obviously, they’ve never met me.” Shona laughed, and Heather laughed with her.

“You represent a very complicated case, Miss Magruder. It would be wise to completely ascertain the boundaries of your abilities,” Dumbledore said. “Your fath...” He nearly scowled. “I am sorry. Remus is not an ordinary wizard. This brings us to a more difficult subject. Remus, would you care for me to continue?”

Lupin took a deep breath, and slowly let it out. “This should come from me,” he said. “Heather, we need to talk more about the... disease that I have.”



Heather nodded. "You're worried that I have it, aren't you?"

"No! No!" Lupin insisted. "Goodness, there wouldn't be any doubt about that! I can assure you that you don't have it. It's a miracle that Shona doesn't have it, however, and I dearly hope that it hasn't affected you in any way."

"Remus' problem may explain why your magical abilities are incomplete," Dumbledore interjected.

"Is that why you're afraid of him?" Heather asked Shona.

Shona squirmed in her seat. "It's not a simple thing," she said. "What I felt for Remus, what I feel... I don't know if it's enough ta... och, it's just not that simple."

"I have lycanthropy," Lupin blurted out; "I've had it since the age of six."

Heather said, "Lycanthropy... I've heard that word before... you know, I have been well schooled. Madame Hartmann insisted on it. Lycanthropy... lycos... that's Greek for... for what...? Wolf...?" Heather paled, but then began to laugh. "Oh, that's brilliant; next you'll be telling me the old man's a vampyre, right?"

Lupin laughed nervously. He rattled off, "Certainly not! That's the only thing I can think of that would be worse. Can you imagine? At least I have twenty-four or twenty-five good days between episodes. Vampirism is a daily nightmare! It can only be controlled if potions are commenced before a vampyre drinks human blood, and the potions are nearly as damning as the curse." He looked to Harry, who thought Lupin was going into a panic. "If you think I look terrible around the full moon... even potion-managed vampyres are waxy pale things. They constantly smell of the potions – you'd think they lived in a cauldron. No, I'll take my existence over that, thank you very much!"

Heather clutched at Harry's arm as if she were drowning. "You're serious!" she shouted.

Harry drew her to him. "It's all right," he said.

She pulled angrily away from him. "Like hell it's all right!" She jabbed her index finger at Shona. "You knew! My God, you knew! That's why you handed me off to Fiona, isn't it?"

"I handed yeh off because I couldn't take care of yeh. I damn near drank myself ta death – and not because of what yer thinkin'," Shona said. Her voice quavered. "I found out what Remus is, all right. It was the last time I saw him 'til now; he wasn't supposed ta be there. It was just me an' Black, takin' in one last climb afore the winter. God, I used ta love the mountains..." She paused and a small smile flickered across her face, the last gasp of a fleeting memory. "The bastards dragged Remus up there. They chained him up like an animal, an' they beat him and kicked him, an'... an' they called me a whore an' a lot worse. He was goin' mad with pain – I don't know if it was the beating, or what was happenin' ta him." She reached out and squeezed Lupin's hand. "They threw me at him. I figured they wanted him ta kill me. He caught me with... with his claws..." She stopped, and burst into tears.

Heather awkwardly reached out to comfort her, but Shona swatted away her hand and barked, "Yeh ever wonder where the scars on my leg came from?" She turned to Remus, with a gentler tone. "I screamed, and... yeh recognised me, I'm sure of it. Yeh stopped, and that jus' made 'em angrier."

Shona took a deep breath before she continued. "Remus got loose, and he went straight after 'em. They had their wands, six or seven of 'em, and they all hit him at once. He just let out this howl and went limp. I... well, I figured I was alone. I ran a ridge line an' I came ta the end. One of 'em shot his wand at me. I slipped an' I fell."

"Who were 'they'?" Harry asked.

"Death Eaters," Lupin said quietly. "They stunned me. I managed to follow and I saw her fall. That's all I remembered the next day."

"I don't know how far I fell," Shona said. "I don't know how I made it to the trail head. I figured Remus and Black were both dead, and they'd be lookin' fer me. As soon as I could run, I ran."

"All we found the next day were bits of her clothing, torn by me, and a pool of blood fifty or sixty feet below the ridge," Lupin explained. "I guessed that the Death Eaters had taken her body. Sirius... Sirius assumed that she'd crawled off into the brush or fallen further. He was certain that I'd killed her. You see... Sirius took it upon himself to tell Shona that we were all wizards. Why he picked a full moon to do it... I was supposed to be in my safe place where I couldn't harm anyone, not on some accursed mountainside. The Death Eaters ambushed me and brought me up." Lupin took Shona's hand with both of his. "He could have picked any weekend, the git. I'd have stayed behind; that was far too steep a slope for me."

Shona said, "We should never a' been on Ben Nevis that late in the season to begin with. It was cold, yeh couldn't see more than twenty feet the first night... shouldna been there. With what Black told me... well, it took a lot a' single-malt to swallow that story, let me tell yeh. He always was first to the floor when drinkin' was involved. If..." She struggled for composure. "...if we hadna been drinkin', maybe Black might a' been able to do somethin'."

Lupin gently stroked Shona's hand. "It's much more likely that Sirius would have gotten himself killed. Remember what I said last night, about regret?" He looked to Harry. "It was never the same with Sirius after we thought she had died. I think that started it all, in some ways – all the distrust and the anger. Wormtail simply took advantage. I had to escape, to bury myself in something, so I took an assignment in Eastern Europe for a few months. When I returned, even James was distant."

Heather sat silent, and Lupin studied her face. At length, he asked her, "What are you thinking? Please say something... anything."

"You can't be a... a werewolf. This isn't happening – it can't be happening," Heather said. "You seem so normal, but... what am I saying? Normal? There's nothing normal about any of this! I can't... I don't know if I can handle this." She stood up.

“Where are yeh goin’?” Shona asked. “We’re not done here.”

“I can’t take any more, not now,” Heather blurted. “I need to be alone.” She brushed past Harry’s outstretched hand and rushed toward the doorway.

“If I’d known he was alive, I would a’ come back,” Shona said. “I was afraid of what I saw, but I would ‘a come back. I... I loved him somethin’ awful.”

“I can’t take this in. I just can’t!” Heather cried.

“Heather! He’s not a monster,” Shona called after her, but Heather was already running toward the switchback that led to the beach.

Lupin sagged in his chair. “I’ve turned her life completely upside down. She must hate me,” he sighed.

“She requires time to process what she has heard, and she will need support and guidance after that,” Dumbledore said.

“She can handle it,” Shona snapped.

Lupin muttered, “Can she? I doubt I could, under the same conditions.”

Shona nodded. “She’s tough. Give her time. I’m more worried about this talent the two of yeh were talkin’ about this morning. So... is she one of yeh, or not?”

Dumbledore thoughtfully stroked his beard. “As I said, she is not a witch, not in the sense which we generally understand. Miss Malloch, your daughter was reading my thoughts last night, or more precisely, my intentions.” Harry’s mouth dropped open. “This is a form of a magic we call Legilimency,” Dumbledore went on. “She showed an ability to recognize and perhaps even prevent my own use of Legilimency, which is a defence that we term Occlumency. These are both rather advanced magics, and she wields them with no

understanding or instruction. At the same time, the training wand barely responded to her. She may be a wild talent.”

Lupin appeared surprised. “Isn’t that really a myth?” he asked.

Harry was reeling – everything Heather had said about spotting lies suddenly took on different meaning. “You mentioned that before – what do you mean?” he managed to ask Dumbledore.

“Wild talents are Muggles or Squibs who possess one magical ability or skill in full measure,” Dumbledore explained. “Sometimes, they possess it in greater measure than most wizards or witches. There have been cases of Muggle healers who unwittingly cast wandless healing charms. Mr. Filch casts only one charm but he does so with his hands as effectively as I cast it with a wand. Algernon studied a case of a Muggle gambler who could divine the outcomes of future sporting contests with fair accuracy; the poor man barely avoided losing his life over it. There are more wild talents than anyone realises, Remus. For the most part, these people live their lives in a Muggle context. Many fail to fully recognise their ability; others intentionally hide or obscure it. Given the current climate, that may be for the best.”

“Heather has commitments, right? She has to deliver a record soon,” Shona said firmly. “She can’t be dragged off to some school for months at a stretch.”

“That should not be necessary,” Dumbledore said. “Together, we shall find a means to help your daughter address her ability in the context of her life.”

“About this record business... there’s something else you should know,” Lupin said to Shona. “The man who owns the recording company is a wizard.”

Shona gasped and began to cough. “I knew he was a rotten bastard, but... cor, he’s not one of them... is he?” she managed.

“We don’t think so,” Lupin told her, “but he’s not exactly a favourite of ours. Harry’s a sort of accidental business partner of his.”

Shona's eyebrows rose. "You're in business with Keith MacLeish? Don't suppose yeh'll tell me how ta get Heather out of business with him?" she asked Harry.

"Erm... I haven't even met the man yet," Harry admitted. "It's been a problem?"

Shona scowled. "Heather was satisfied with what she had," she said. "The deal with MacLeish was dear Fiona's last hurrah; I set a solicitor on her after that. Thank God she's cut out now; after expenses and an allowance, the money goes into a trust. I dinnae get her out of the deal, though, and she owes three records. I still cannae fathom why they took her on at all. They're tryin' ta make her into somethin' she's not."

Lupin began, "What do you mean by that...?"

Harry fidgeted in his seat. "Shouldn't someone go after her?" he blurted.

Lupin started to stand, but Shona waved him off. "She's not ready for yeh. She doesn't want me ta be her mum but she'll cry on my shoulder if yeh give her some time. That's the thing now."

"It is nearly one o'clock," Dumbledore said to Harry. "You should make your way to the tower and await Kingsley's arrival. You must not neglect your training."

\* \* \* \* \*

"You're particularly intense today, Potter," Shacklebolt said. "I think we'll stop for now, before one or both of us are injured."

Harry leaned forward, his hands pressing against his knees, and struggled to catch his breath. "I'm sorry," he panted. "It won't happen again."

Shacklebolt gave a derisive snort. "Of course it will; you're intense by nature. Let's turn to your assignment. Sit." Harry reached out to one of the chairs pushed against the side of the Great Hall and sat heavily.

"Yet another example, I see," Shacklebolt said. "You really have no idea, do you?"

Harry was distracted, and still a bit short of breath. He looked at Shacklebolt strangely. "What are you going on about?"

Shacklebolt pointed at the chair. "You may have given your wand a bit of a wave, though I didn't see it, but you didn't speak the charm – did you?"

Harry shrugged. "I really don't know. I wasn't thinking about it."

"I suspect that you've just identified a common thread," Shacklebolt said; "No matter - it's time to go over your assignment." Harry frowned, and Shacklebolt paid him no mind. "I'm assuming you experienced the usual sorts of childhood incidents?" he went on. "Primary school seems to bring out the best and worst in the young."

Harry nodded. "I ended up on a rooftop once, and I made a pane of glass disappear at the zoo."

"What's the first peculiar incidence of magic that you remember after your Hogwarts letter?" Shacklebolt asked.

Harry chuckled. "It's all peculiar, when I stop to think on it. But especially peculiar... let me think..." He struggled to think of something. "Well... there was the bit with the Sorting Hat, at the end of my second year."

Shacklebolt's eyebrow rose slightly. "What were you doing with the Sorting Hat?"

"Fawkes brought it to me, in the Chamber of Secrets... I assume you know about that?" Harry said.

“That’s the chamber Salazar Slytherin supposedly built within Hogwarts. I know you were believed to be the Heir of Slytherin for a time – ridiculous, of course – but how are you connected to the Chamber?” Shacklebolt asked.

Harry gave him an abbreviated version of the events, and Shacklebolt’s eyes lit as he listened. He was particularly amused to discover that Ron was responsible for Gilderoy Lockhart’s memory loss.

At length, Shacklebolt said, “Arthur and Molly continue to surprise me. As far as I know, they’ve never told a soul – excepting Dumbledore, to be sure.” He stroked his chin thoughtfully, and added in a slow rumble, “It’s for the best, of course; Ginny Weasley would be a pariah if people knew she’d been under the thrall of either Voldemort or Tom Riddle.” When Harry’s eyebrows rose, Shacklebolt smiled. “The Order has been briefed as to Voldemort’s identity. For the life of me, I don’t know why that’s held close. I think we should shout it from the rooftops.”

“So, does that qualify as ‘peculiar magic’?” Harry asked.

Shacklebolt laughed. “That incident was peculiar from beginning to end. I will, of course, keep it in confidence. Perhaps we should limit the discussion to events since you left Hogwarts in June?”

“Well, I suppose it all started when I blew up Dudley’s punching bags...” Harry began. Event by event, they worked their way through the summer. It was a longer list than Harry had contemplated. He hadn’t thought about the telephone call to Hermione since Bill Weasley had told him on the steps to Gringotts that she was safe; as they mulled over what had happened, Harry realised that he was probably responsible. He might have levitated Aunt Petunia’s prize vase off the mantle, as he had been angry with Dudley. He still wondered about his response to Snape’s Legilimens attack; Harry noticed that Shacklebolt smiled faintly at the mention of Snape writhing in pain. There had been the screaming in the stairwell when Draco Malfoy had held his ears in pain.



He was surprised when Shacklebolt told him that he had summoned a chair for Tonks, in the shed at the Burrow; he thought he remembered reaching for a chair, but Lupin had told Shacklebolt otherwise. Of course, he had taken down Dumbledore's barrier and silent space; later he was able to create his own silent space without clearly knowing how it was done. He disarmed Dumbledore without a wand as well, when he had thought Hermione might be Obliviated. Shacklebolt growled at the mention of his earring being summoned with a table leg. He had twice apparated without Apparating, once through a shield charm. He had summoned Ginny in mid-air, he had summoned Shacklebolt off the rocks and into the sea, and he had summoned Heather on the beach as well. Shacklebolt had the good grace not to mention what Harry had done to the Death Eaters; it was understood, and nothing needed to be said.

"There was a shared dream, as well, but that may have been Voldemort's doing," Harry said cautiously.

"Explain," commanded Shacklebolt. Harry walked through a very flat, detached version of the dream, ending when Ginny, Luna and Daphne Greengrass were sent away.

Shacklebolt asked, "Have you discussed this with anyone?"

"Ginny and Luna were there," Harry recounted. "Ron knows about it, in general. Tonks knows it happened. That's it. Of course, I don't know if Hermione spoke to anyone."

"Many of us are rather superstitious when it comes to dreams. It's best you keep that under wraps, although you should explore it further with Dumbledore. Lupin asked me... he wanted to know about other kinds of resources." Shacklebolt's hesitance surprised Harry. "Certain resources are available to Aurors when they experience, er, certain sorts of difficulties. Do you require... certain resources?"

"Madam Bones asked about that," Harry said; "I think Hermione was the one in need of those."

"I'm certain that she has them," Shacklebolt said. "I'm also mildly surprised that you know of her needs. Have you received a message?"

"No... should I be expecting one?" Harry asked excitedly.

Shacklebolt shook his head. "I assumed that was why you knew," he said. Harry glared at him, but he was too spent to argue.

"Back to the assignment, then," Shacklebolt said. "I certainly heard some common threads amongst your descriptions. I wonder if you did, as well? Let's begin with physical states during the various episodes."

"Erm... heat? I remember being hot," Harry said.

Shacklebolt waved his wand and muttered. He wrote the word 'heat' in mid-air. "Continue," he said.

"Sweat? I wasn't just hot – I was practically soaked a time or two," Harry added. Shacklebolt wrote 'sweat' beneath 'heat'. He motioned for Harry to go on.

Harry said, "A draft – I remember a draft. It was like a wind, when I blew up the punching bags, and when... well, you know." Shacklebolt scribbled 'draft / wind'.

"All of those states are associated with substantial discharges of magic. Very well - let's follow on the five most significant episodes," Shacklebolt directed. "In my mind, those would be the destruction of the punching bags; the long-distance conjuring of the flower and the book; the apparating that wasn't Apparation; the bodily summonings; and the incident at the Grangers' home. We'll set aside the dream for now. What were your emotional states?"

"Anger, for some of them," Harry said immediately. "A lot of anger." 'Anger' joined the other words floating in the air.

"What else?"

"I don't know," Harry grumbled. "Rage? Well, I suppose that's just anger." Shacklebolt wrote nothing.

"Why were you angry when you destroyed the punching bags?" Shacklebolt probed.

"I'd just gotten the letter from Gringotts about Sirius' will," Harry said. "I went down to the cellar, and everything just came out... how I'd gotten Sirius killed, you know, and how everyone around me gets hurt. I was thinking about Voldemort killing people... the Dursleys, Dumbledore, Lupin, all of you in the Order, the Weasleys, and my schoolmates... Ron... Hermione..." He clenched his fists and squeezed; somehow that seemed to help. Shacklebolt wrote 'worried about Granger, Ron Weasley' beneath 'anger'.

"Right, then. What were you feeling when you did the long-distance conjuring?" Shacklebolt asked.

"Hermione and I were having a row. She was angry with me for cutting myself off at the outset of the summer, and I made her cry. I felt like such an arse. I remember wanting to apologise, you know – to make her feel better," Harry recalled. Shacklebolt wrote 'comforting Granger'.

"You scared us half to death, truth be told," Shacklebolt said. "Of everything you've done, that is the most difficult for me to comprehend. What about the non-Apparations?"

"When we were training, I was panicked," Harry said. "You were putting on your Voldemort act, and I was trying to figure a way to get behind you. You started in on what Voldemort does to Aurors..."

"...and to women, and what he would do to people close to you – I recall that," Shacklebolt said. He scribbled 'times two' next to 'worried about Granger, Ron Weasley'.

"I think you know enough about the second time," Harry said quietly.

Shacklebolt looked sadly at Harry. "I do. I'm left with one question about that event. I hope you'll have an answer, but I'll understand if

you don't. When you crossed that room, who were you trying to save?"

"Wormtail was killing her," Harry said softly. "I had to do something."

"I assumed that you were trying to save everyone in the room. You played it as well as it could be played. I've never seen anything like that – never in my life," Shacklebolt admitted.

"I'm glad it turned out that way," Harry said.

Shacklebolt wrote 'saving Granger', and then went silent for a long time, long enough for Harry to become unnerved by the unbroken column of 'Granger' floating before him.

"The summoning is interesting," Shacklebolt mused. "Summoning the Weasley girl isn't so hard to understand." He scratched out 'Ron Weasley' next to 'Granger' and instead wrote 'friends'.

"I was trying to keep Heather from falling into the sea," Harry offered. Shacklebolt nodded, and changed the 'times two' next to 'worried about Granger, friends' into 'times four'.

"What about me?" Shacklebolt asked.

"Well... I just wanted to pull you into the water," Harry smirked.

"Charming," Shacklebolt said. "We'll set that one aside, other than to note that the wandless work seems to be getting easier for you, perhaps more conscious and less instinctive... or at least it requires less provocation. Despite that, one thread seems more common than the rest – especially for the major events." He waved his wand at the words drifting in the air. "You need to determine why she's the common thread. If you don't take this up with Dumbledore, I will."

"I thought you said you would keep my confidences," Harry fumed.

"I said I would keep the events relating to the Chamber of Secrets in confidence, and I shall. This, however, is too critical to leave to chance," Shacklebolt said. "You need to clearly understand how she

will help you or hinder you. Frankly, you need to engage in the same exercise with regard to all of us, including Lupin's daughter. You're to start with Miss Granger, however. It's not clear to me whether she is an asset or a liability. You need assets, because you have more than enough liabilities."

"Leave Hermione out of this," Harry snarled. "She's off limits."

"Voldemort didn't think so," Shacklebolt said. Harry drew his wand in a flash.

Shacklebolt crossed his arms. "If I seem cold to you, so be it. I look forward to your bitterness and resentment ten years from now. If you're still around to berate me, then I will have successfully discharged my responsibility."

"We'd better be finished," Harry snapped.

"We are," Shacklebolt said. "Resume your reading. Be prepared to fight tomorrow, and with your wits about you. One o'clock, this location." He looked around the room with irritation. "Where is Tonks? She should have been here five minutes ago."

"What for?" Harry asked.

"For your training – did you forget? Dumbledore wanted her to make quick progress with you, so I'm giving her two hours per day at the outset," Shacklebolt said.

Harry was curious despite himself. "What can Tonks teach me that's so important?"

"Underestimate her at your peril, Potter," Shacklebolt chided him. "We want to take advantage of your physical assets. You're young and you're fast. Most of your opponents will be much older than you and much slower on their feet. You're doing a fair job of working on strength and endurance, so we'll leave you to your routines. We want to develop your agility, though, so we'll be falling back on Auror training methods." He smiled broadly, and explained, "Tonks is going to teach you to dance."

“Dance?” Harry spluttered. “With Tonks?” He buried his head in his hands; he could think of a thousand things he’d rather do than dance, and a hundred partners less likely to injure him than Tonks. How easily can you mend a broken foot? he wondered.

## Chapter Twenty-five

### DANCING WITH THE PARTNER AT HAND

“That’s enough,” Tonks said.

“I didn’t say anything,” Harry muttered.

Tonks chided him, “You’re annoyed – which is fine with me, by the way. I’d just rather you spew forth than hold it in.”

“All we’ve done for half an hour is walk in circles. I’m not the expert here – I’ve admitted that, right? – but walking isn’t dancing,” Harry said. “And I still don’t understand why in Merlin’s name I’m supposed to do this.”

Tonks shook her head. “You’d think I was that old ghost Binns, the way you’ve been drifting off,” she pouted. “We’ve done more than walk in circles, you know. You crawl before you walk, and you walk before you dance – especially the tango. You’re moving naturally with the beat, which is good. You seemed to grasp the idea of the line of dance, and you managed the obstacles nicely. Stand up – we’re not finished here.”

Harry reluctantly stood. At least the music’s tolerable, he thought.

This time, though, Tonks left the portable stereo idle. “No music this time,” she said. “The tango is about the movement between partners, and it’s about the kind of walking. A lot of dances are glorified walking, but the tango is different. By the time you know what you’re doing, you’ll understand why those differences matter.” She sighed, and put her hands on her hips. “I know you think this is pure shite, Harry. You’ll have to trust me for the moment. Start walking again, slowly.”

Harry was exasperated by the whole experience, but he complied. “I’m not in a trusting mood,” he sulked.

Tonks ignored him. “When you step forward, what part of your foot strikes first?” she asked.

"I don't know... erm... my heel?" Harry ventured.

"Right in one," Tonks said, "and dead wrong for the tango – wrong for duelling, as well." Harry perked up slightly. She moved beside him, and they walked step for step, circling the emptied Great Hall counter-clockwise. "Step forward onto the balls of your feet," she commanded. "Light steps... no, no, too stiff... that's a bit better... stop."

She stepped back and surveyed him. "Feeling a bit fey, are we?" She shook her head. "Men. You don't need to tiptoe like you're wearing a dress and heels. Just keep your weight over the balls of your feet. You need a picture in your mind...something that'll stick..." She crossed one arm and rested her chin against her free hand, and then abruptly nodded. "You're a jungle cat – a lion on the prowl."

Harry took a startled step backward. "A... what?"

"A lion on the prowl," Tonks repeated. "That should work for you, Gryffindor. Up over the balls of your feet, legs a little straighter than ordinary, a bit further back with each step than you might like... think 'king of the jungle'."

Harry couldn't evade the dream that he and Hermione had shared. Stalking Malfoy and the other Slytherins was an especially vivid memory. He rolled forward slightly on his feet and stalked around the room. He could feel it – the power of the movement, the slow saunter from side to side, the readiness to pounce at any moment.

"Now that's what I'm talking about," Tonks said. "Stop, and do it backward. Tilt your head to the right, so you can see where you're going. Stay light on your feet – think 'king of the jungle backing up'... keep it to a walk, though... good!" She nodded her head and clapped her hands. "You're taking to this better than I expected. Right, then – let's work on the embrace."

Harry stared at Tonks dumbly, and she motioned for him. "Come over here," she said. "Time marches on, right?"

Harry tugged at his collar. "Erm... embrace?"



"Tango partners embrace one another. Be glad Shacklebolt isn't teaching you, although he'd probably recommend swing instead," Tonks said with a smirk.

"He taught you?" Harry asked.

"No, thank Merlin! He's not exactly a forgiving partner," Tonks laughed. "My point was that Auror pairs aren't always male and female, but they still learn to dance together. It's an efficient means to an end."

"Oh... oh!" Harry said. He had a brief and troubling image of dancing with Ron, and wasn't sure whether to laugh or retch at the thought. Embracing Tonks is a damn sight better than that, he thought.

"Right, then – I'll come to you," Tonks said. "For the time being, I'll be leading. That's not how it's supposed to be done in Latin dances, but I'm not a big one for tradition. Besides, I know what I'm doing and you don't. So... I guess you're the girl."

"Charming," Harry deadpanned.

"Again – shift your weight up onto the balls of your feet, but keep straight," Tonks ordered. She moved in close – very close – and pulled him toward her with her right hand against his back. "Put your left hand on my upper arm, and push just a bit. Keep it light – gentle but firm, like my hand on your back," she said. "The man pulls, the woman pushes away... sort of like life, isn't it?"

She extended her left arm to the side, and said, "Give me your free arm – come on, then." Harry put his right arm out. She pressed her palm lightly against his. "If we both knew what we were doing, we might hold hands," she said. "This way, if either of us lets up, our hands will come apart. Think of it as an early warning. How do you feel?"

Their faces were practically touching at the cheek. Harry felt silly and a little embarrassed. The feel of Tonks pressing against him stirred a

flutter of something inside that he liked but didn't want. Tonks isn't a girl, Harry thought, she's... she's just Tonks.

He fought an impulse to laugh nervously and instead went for a joke; "I feel pretty," he squeaked in falsetto.

Tonks snorted in his ear, and their hands came apart. "Prat," she grunted, but he felt her smile. She took up his hand again. "Let's try walking. I'll move forward and you'll move backward. Remember to keep your head up."

The first attempts were furtive on Harry's part. He felt awkward and flushed, and his hand kept slipping loose. Tonks turned so that Harry walked forward and she walked backward, and he was more comfortable. They kept alternating, forward and backward, backward and forward, until they moved smoothly together. Satisfied with his progress, Tonks put on the music and they repeated the exercise. When they stopped, he realised that his feet had remained untouched; he had stepped on her feet at least twice, however.

She grinned at him. "That was la caminata – the walk. It's the basic pattern, the one everything else flows from. You're doing well, Harry... really. I thought this might take the whole two hours today. Let's look at some basic steps, then." They breezed through the stroll, the cadence-counting step, the chase, and the cradle step in quick succession; Tonks told him that they were all two-step walks and could be strung together in any number and order.

"How's it coming?" Bill Weasley called from the loft overlooking the hall.

"I still have my feet, more or less," Tonks replied. "Come down here, so we can show him how it's done."

"I'm not much for a straight tango. We mostly danced milonga when I was in Chile," Bill said. "Up for that?"

"Milonga... I like speed," Tonks purred.

Bill descended the stairs to the hall. "Any of your music fast enough?" he asked.

"Fast as a Firebolt," she laughed as she dug through a short stack of compact discs. She managed to scatter the plastic cases across the floor.

Bill tried not to snigger at her. He caught the curiosity on Harry's face, and explained, "Milonga's a kind of really fast tango. It's sort of, I don't know... bouncy? Some people think that the tango's actually a slowed-down milonga, but I don't think anyone knows. You really have to watch your line, though; it's very quick, and you could easily collide in a crowd."

"Any certain pattern, or should we just chance it?" Tonks asked Bill.

"How about salida, cadencia, tango close, salida, chase, stroll, cadencia, tango close?" Bill offered.

"Any adornos, or caresses?" she asked.

Bill shrugged. "Wing it, I suppose." Harry gaped at them both, bewildered by the exchange.

Tonks nodded, and took up the position that Harry had held. Bill swept her up with a wolfish grin. The moment that the music started, they began to race around the hall. Harry quickly moved out of the way for fear of being run down. He was dazzled by the speed. Tonks' coordination on the dance floor was so improbable to him; he waited for Tonks and Bill to go sprawling each time that their feet intertwined, but it never happened. The dance was terribly intimate; by the expressions on their faces, Harry almost felt as though he was intruding. After two songs, they stopped with obvious reluctance.

Tonks playfully slapped Bill on the arm. "You should know better than to place bets with me. That's five galleons, mister!"

Bill smiled broadly. "Gladly surrendered," he said. "Merlin, but you can dance!"

Tonks turned to Harry with a smirk. "So, my young pupil... any questions?"

"Do you expect me to be able to do that?" Harry spluttered.

"No," Tonks said, "but you'll get what you need."

"What did you think of milonga?" Bill asked.

Harry fidgeted. "Erm... it's awfully... uh... close?"

Tonks sniggered, and Bill nodded appreciatively. "One of my friends describes it as 'sex, standing up'," he said.

"Bill! You're going to give Harry fits!" Tonks scolded.

Bill waved his hands derisively. "Bah! He can handle it... can't you, Harry?"

Harry suspected that his face was somewhere between red and purple. "Erm... standing up?" he blurted.

Tonks frowned at Bill. "All right, you've had your fun," she said. "No worries, Harry. We will certainly not be dancing like that."

"Are we done, then?" Harry asked anxiously.

Tonks nodded. "Practice your positioning without a partner. Remember – 'king of the jungle'."

Bill raised an eyebrow, and crossed his arms. "'King of the jungle', is it?" He cast a withering look at Harry, and didn't break into a big smile until well after Harry became excruciatingly uncomfortable. He laughed, and cast a brotherly arm around Harry's shoulders. "You're almost as much fun to tweak as Ron," he said.

"Have you seen him?" Harry asked.

"He was outside, last I saw. He must have been on the beach with Heather for a good two hours," Bill said.

Harry froze. "I'm sorry?"

"He was on the beach with..." Bill stopped, and regarded Harry with growing alarm. "Are you all right? Did I say something wrong?"

"He was on the beach with who?" Harry asked roughly.

Bill looked to Tonks. "Er... help me out here, would you?"

Tonks frowned. "She was in a right state, Harry. It's no wonder, after the day she had yesterday," she said. "I gave it a go earlier on – didn't get anywhere, but I did learn a few new words. Ginny was down there for a time. I didn't know that Ron decided to try."

Harry set his jaw. "He'd better not have tried anything."

Bill asked hesitantly, "What's this? I know you and Heather are fast friends, but... uh... I presumed that you were spoken for."

Harry simmered, just short of a full boil. "'Spoken for'? What's that about?" he demanded.

Tonks shifted her feet nervously. "Well... 'spoken for' is a bit strong, but... oh, for Merlin's sake, Harry! Everyone who spent any time around you and Hermione this summer has to figure that there's something between the two of you." Before Harry could say anything, she waved him off and continued, "I know what you've said, and I know what she's said. I also know what I saw at Grimmauld Place. If there was nothing there, then you were both putting on a splendid act."

"Enough!" Harry shouted. "Not everything is about Hermione! If we're done here...?"

"I think I should speak with Ron," Bill said gently.

"Whatever," Harry snapped, and he stormed off. Ron had better hope that I don't find him first, he thought.

Lupin was outside the tower with Mr. Lovegood. Together they were removing the dents and long scratches left on the van by Shona's late-night collision. Lupin looked up, and asked, "How did you make out with Shackbolt? He said something about getting at the basis for your wandless magic."

"He has an idea about it, all right. Rubbish... it's rubbish," Harry snarled.

"A package arrived for you, from Gringotts," Lupin said calmly. "Shackbolt looked it over and determined it to be safe. Were you expecting anything?"

"No," Harry said with a shrug. He took the obviously shrunken box and then headed briskly toward the beach.

"Come back here before you do something that you'll surely regret," Lupin said. "Heather's down there with Ron, but you obviously know that."

"Ron's no good for her," Harry said without looking back at Lupin.

Lupin continued to follow him through the tall grasses. "I'm thankful she was willing to talk with anyone, after what she's been put through. What's worse, I can't let up; her abilities still need to be identified and evaluated. She's certainly frightened of me; I suppose she'd be mad if she weren't. As for Ron... for the sake of discussion, tell me why he's no good for her?"

Harry turned on Lupin and said, "He's different now. He's my friend and I'd still want him at my back in a scrape, but I don't trust him alone with Heather. If she fancies him... I don't know what I'll do."

Lupin remained calm, almost still. "Is this about Ron, or is this about you?" he asked.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Harry demanded.

"If it's warranted, then I'll be worried about Ron. At the moment, I'm more worried about you," Lupin said. "What are your intentions here?"

"You didn't ask about my intentions yesterday afternoon," Harry fumed. "All you did was warn me off."

"Yesterday afternoon, I didn't know that Shona was alive, and I certainly didn't know that Heather was my daughter. Yesterday afternoon was a lifetime ago, Harry," Lupin said.

"I don't have any intentions – Heather's a friend," Harry said. His jaw tightened and he added angrily, "Everyone seems to be an expert on my bloody intentions – as if it were anyone's business!"

Lupin locked his world-weary eyes on Harry. "You've had a very close friendship with Hermione for the last five years, and you may need to draw on that in the times ahead," he observed. "I admit that I've wondered whether the two of you were becoming something more than simply friends. That's quite different than suggesting that you're somehow intended, or fated, or anything along those lines. I certainly haven't decided that, and you're correct – it's no one else's business, one way or the other."

Harry cooled a bit, and Lupin plunged on. "Heather's a different matter entirely. First, you're a lightning rod for forces against which she has no defence. Death Eaters have been attacking Squibs this summer as well as Muggle-borns – she's at enough risk already. Second, there's something wrong about all of this."

Harry eyed him warily. "What do you mean, wrong?"

Lupin sighed. "The magical world is one of coincidences, to some degree, but all of this feels wrong to me. You went from the Dursleys to Grimmauld Place to here in a matter of days. Your emancipation has had a number of consequences, and that the emancipation itself was – at least in part – contrived. Now, you proceed from being spotted riding down a lane to dining out to flirting to what I've no doubt is genuine affection, again in days. The object of your affection appears to be my offspring, born of a woman I believed dead – a woman who quite possibly should be a werewolf but is not. The only common factor in all of this would appear to be Sirius... but the

review of your finances has caused me to give up on chance for the time being. Something's amiss."

Harry crossed his arms. "Are you suggesting Heather is involved in some kind of plot or something?"

"No, not intentionally at any rate," Lupin insisted. "I just think you need to exercise caution. We both need to exercise caution. Neither she nor Shona possess protections or defences, and it's possible that the both of them are unwitting pawns in some sort of plan. Those are my reasons for 'warning you off', as you put it."

Harry wanted to argue with Lupin, but he could not. Instead, he lowered his head and said, "You're right, of course."

Lupin reached out to Harry, but Harry flinched. "I'm sorry," Lupin said. "Merlin knows, I'm forever saying that to you."

"It's not your fault," Harry said sullenly. "You're right... and she's your daughter, and you should protect her - even from me. It's right for her to come first. I'll manage. I've always managed."

Lupin's sad eyes grew sadder. "Harry... are you afraid that I'm going to abandon you?" he asked softly.

"No... no! Of course not!" Harry insisted, because he knew it was the right thing to say.

Lupin's words were strong and clear. "I will not do that. I have accepted responsibilities where you are concerned, and I take them seriously; you'll be seeing quite a lot of me. I want... I simply want you to be sensible. We both know what Voldemort will do to those close to you."

Harry said, "What am I supposed to do if she doesn't agree? I mean, she's already told you to sod off."

Lupin grimaced. "She's headstrong. I can't imagine where that comes from. Just be sensible - please."



Harry nodded. "I understand," he said, and turned away from the cliff's edge. "So, what are you doing tonight?"

"Shona was flummoxed about missing half a day's work; she certainly wasn't going to miss this evening, as well. I'm taking Ted and Odd to dine at her restaurant and I believe that Albus will join us there," Lupin said. "Ted's been quite busy today, as you can imagine. I'm anxious to be updated. In fact, I'd be happy if you came along. Luna will come to dinner with us, I'd imagine; Odd surely wouldn't leave her here alone."

"I'll come to dinner, then," Harry said. As he turned back toward the tower, he hastily added, "Thank you."

"Why? For preventing you from dashing to the beach?" Lupin asked.

"You know why," Harry said quickly. He didn't wait for a response.

Harry tucked away the box from Gringotts and then slipped back into the tower. As he climbed the stairs to the garret, Harry thought of the study that only he could enter. He wasn't wearing the Black signet ring so he passed by the door – but he resolved to open it soon. The door to Luna and Ginny's room was closed. Harry knocked.

"Ginny, I have reached my limit," Luna called out. "Would you please leave me be?"

"Er... sorry," Harry called back. "I'll just be going, then."

He heard a quick scramble behind the door, and then a click. The door opened slightly. "Please come in," Luna offered.

"If you need time alone, I really can find something else to do," Harry assured her.

"You are always welcome," Luna told him. "Ginny is not welcome, at present."

"I suppose she's just worried," Harry said. "We all were, you know."

“That is obvious,” Luna said. “I have never seen so much fussing. It was helpful at first; now it is irritating. I am not an invalid, Harry.”

“Then why have you hidden yourself away?” Harry asked. “I assumed that it was because you couldn’t manage the stairs.”

“This room has a lock that prevents Ginny from waiting on me hand and foot,” Luna said. “Thank you for letting my daddy and me stay here. I needed to sulk and curse and so forth.”

“Luna, if you ever need to talk...” Harry began.

“Thank you,” Luna said. “The offer is reciprocal. I do have one need at the moment.”

“Name it,” Harry said.

“I need to get out of this room and out of this tower, and I need to do it without Ginny or Ronald or my daddy following two paces behind,” Luna sighed.

Harry smiled. “I could take you... somewhere nearby. You could listen to music, or read, or whatever you like. We can use the Bonnie, of course, if you had something else in mind.”

“The Bonnie... do you mean your motorbike?” When Harry nodded, she smiled and added, “Perhaps later – that might be fun. A walk would do me good, for now,” Luna said. “You have a plan, then?”

Harry took out his wand and lightly tapped Luna on the top of her head. “A Disillusionment should do the trick,” he explained.

“What an unusual sensation,” she said as she disappeared from view.

“I’ll need you to have a look at something, at the doorway,” Harry explained. “Be sure to keep quiet – your voice will give you away.”

Mr. Lovegood never came out from beneath his van. Lupin eyed Harry curiously and asked if he was heading for the beach. Harry tersely said that he was not and moved on.

Halfway to the cliffs, Luna said quietly, "Thank you for sharing this with me. Thank you for moving slowly, as well."

"Will you make it?" Harry whispered back.

"Oh, yes. I am very happy to be free, even if just for a little while," Luna answered. After a few more paces, she said, "Why did Professor Lupin ask whether you were going to the beach? He sounded unhappy."

Harry hesitated. "Uh... it's nothing. You should see it at some point, though. It's a steep hill to get down; I think it would be too much."

"I'll just take in the view from that rise," Luna said. Harry heard the grass crunch more quickly.

"Luna, slow down," Harry said, more loudly. "You shouldn't overtire yourself."

The trail of crumpled grass came to an abrupt stop a few feet from the cliff's edge. Harry listened carefully, but heard nothing until Luna cleared her throat.

"Well... perhaps we should move on," she said. "I need to sit for a time."

"What did you see?" Harry asked cautiously.

"Ronald continues to seek solace. It is awkward and rather painful to watch," Luna said distantly.

"Seek solace? What does that mean?" Harry asked; his voice rose with each word. "Luna? What does that mean?" He couldn't see her, and she said nothing. I have my answer, he thought. Harry opened the door to the bothy, and waited.

A few moments later, an unseen hand lightly brushed across his arm. "Thank you, Harry," Luna said. "I truly appreciate this."

Harry quickly said, “Finite incantatum,” and Luna came into view once again.

Luna slowly spun in a circle, her big eyes taking in every detail. “I love the colours – they’re very bold,” she sing-songed. She ran her fingers along the spines of Sirius’ music collection. “Muggle record albums... and so many of them.”

Harry nodded. “They belonged to Sirius. The compact discs are mine.”

“I’ve heard of compact discs, but I’ve never seen one,” Luna said. She peered closely at the stereo receiver and amplifier and the compact disc player, and paused to read each label of each button and dial. She pushed the eject button on the compact disc player, and laughed when the drawer came out. Harry explained what he knew about how compact discs worked, and removed one from its case for her to examine.

“Fascinating,” she said. “My daddy prefers Muggle music to the WWN, mostly.” She continued to walk around the room, and took playful punches at the hanging bags.

“Would you like something to drink?” Harry asked. “Everything is from the market in the village. All I have are Muggle fizzy drinks and water.”

“Daddy fancies a Muggle drink called ‘Irn Bru’,” Luna said.

Harry’s nose wrinkled. “I tried that one,” he said. “Didn’t work for me.”

“I don’t care for it,” Luna agreed. “It smells good enough, but it tastes more like water than water does. I became fond of Coca-Cola this summer, actually. Did you know that it can be found everywhere in the world?”

“Including my icebox,” Harry added with a chuckle. He set a red aluminium can atop the counter.

Luna smiled. "I wonder how it will taste here. It was not as sweet in Sweden as it was in France."

Harry found a glass and carefully poured from the can. Luna sat on one of the stools. She bumped her foot, and looked down. "Your trunk is much larger than this one," she observed. "Is someone else from Gryffindor House staying with you?"

Harry frowned. "No. It belonged to my mother."

"Oooh! What do you keep in it?" Luna asked excitedly. "Mother kept her school trunk. We store photographs in it."

"My aunt held onto it, all these years," Harry said in a low voice. "I haven't opened it. I've come close, but I haven't done it." He passed Luna the glass.

She took a swallow. "Thank you," she said. "I might have to spare space in my trunk for a few cans of this. Could it be mildly addictive?"

Harry was distracted by thoughts of the trunk at Luna's feet. "I doubt it," Harry said flatly. "It's intended for children."

Luna tapped the trunk with her toes. "Your mother had a pretty trunk. My mother's trunk is knotty pine, practically lashed together."

"I think I'll have a drink myself," Harry said. He opened the icebox, took out a can of Fanta, and decided that he didn't need a glass.

"I imagine the trunk will clean up quite nicely. You might try using some Mister Sheen – the spray works best," Luna suggested.

Harry's nose wrinkled. "Bleagh! That stuff smells like Mrs. Figg's house!" He eyed Luna warily. "Why are you so keen on the trunk, anyway?"

Luna took another swallow from her glass. "I should finish this before it stops fizzing," she said. She quickly drained the rest of the glass, and then added, "I thought that you were keen on the trunk... and it would look smart in this room."

"I should open it, I suppose, but... it's hard to explain. I'm not sure that I really want to open it. Am I making any sense?" he asked.

Luna looked at him intently – a look that was rather different from her absent, dreamy expressions of the year prior. She was more interesting now, in Harry's opinion. His darker thoughts took over; having your throat cut must change you, it occurred to him.

Her eyes lit and Harry thought she was about to say something. Instead she let forth the loudest belch he had ever heard, even from Ron. Luna's eyes grew slightly wider than usual and she quickly covered her mouth.

Harry dropped his can in shock. The sticky drink sprayed all over his trousers and across the carpeting. "Merlin's balls!" he shouted. He scrambled for the rolling can, and then called out a cleaning charm with the ferocity of a curse.

Luna lowered her hand slowly. "I really do fancy Coca-Cola," she cooed. Harry looked at her dumbly for a moment and then burst out laughing. She smiled broadly; her eyes narrowed, and Harry thought it made her look happier and less surprised.

When Harry finally stopped laughing, she said, "You should laugh more often; it becomes you. So... would you prefer company when you open the trunk? I could leave, if you'd rather be alone."

Harry shook his head. "You're not going to let this go, are you?" He picked up his mother's trunk and moved it to the table in front of the couch.

"You really should put it away if you don't care to open it," Luna said. "I'll stop now."

Harry looked at her crossly. "Why don't you teach Hermione how to do that?" he grumbled.

"How to do what, exactly?" Luna asked.

“How to needle me into doing something, and then back off,” Harry grumbled. “She’d just keep pushing; at least you’re polite about it.”

Luna returned to Sirius’ records. She pulled Yellow Submarine from the stacks, and expertly placed it on the phonograph. “Daddy is fond of the Beatles. Had I mentioned that?”

Harry grinned. “I figured that out for myself,” he said, recalling Odd Lovegood’s off-key rendition of ‘All You Need Is Love’. Luna looked at him curiously but asked nothing.

The music was distracting, as was the company – enough so that Harry found himself lifting the lid of the trunk without thinking. Luna leaned in attentively, as Harry set aside the lid and surveyed the contents. His mother’s trunk was the most orderly trunk he’d ever seen. He decided that she must have packed it away as a keepsake of her school years; not even Hermione’s everyday trunk could be this tidy, he decided. All of the contents were carefully partitioned into impeccable stacks.

There were at least two years’ worth of schoolbooks inside; Harry was surprised to see many of the same titles that he had studied. A set of school robes were neatly folded and placed to one side. Blank parchment was stacked along with quills and bottles of long-dried ink. Loose photographs were bundled, next to a photo album and a stack of seven small leather-bound books with unmarked covers and spines.

Luna waved her hand in the direction of the photo album. “May I?” she asked.

This was my mother’s, he thought. She studied and went to class just like me or Hermione or Ron or Luna or anyone else. His mouth simply wouldn’t form words, so he nodded at Luna by way of reply.

Luna turned the pages of the album as though it were something from a museum, to be carefully preserved. “You look rather like your father, but you have your mother’s smile... actually, you have her entire jaw line.”

“Uh... usually people mention that I have her eyes,” Harry said.

Luna looked back into the album. “Oh,” she said distantly. “I suppose that they do.”

The photographs were mostly taken at Hogwarts. He thought of the images of him and Ron and Hermione, taken by Colin the year prior, and his mum and dad suddenly seemed so close to him – just beyond his fingertips. There were a few photographs in the trunk that were duplicates of the ones inherited from Sirius, but not many. Others depicted the same events, but in wildly different ways. Sirius’ photos almost always captured people at play, Harry realised. His mother, on the other hand, photographed individuals, groups, whole rooms, landscapes – she tried to capture an experience.

Nothing inside the trunk dated after the spring of Lily Evans’ seventh year. Harry wondered, not for the first time, how it had ended up with the Dursleys. Luna set aside the photo album and began to lift the cover of one of the nameless leather books. With a bang, the book flew open.

Harry’s hair blew back in the face of a stiff breeze that arose from the pages. “None may open this book save Lily Evans or those of her blood!” the book howled, and slammed shut.

Luna blinked hard and rubbed at her eyes. The breeze had lifted her close-cropped hair into tufts. “Well... that was remarkable. I doubt the book came that way from Flourish and Blotts. Your mother must have been quite skilled at Charms.” Harry nodded as he ran his fingers through his windblown hair; he couldn’t argue with what he’d just seen. She could manage this before sixth year, he thought, and he was impressed.

He turned the book in his hands and examined it, though he didn’t know what he was looking for. Then he carefully opened the front cover, to reveal a blank page. He began to turn the page, and felt an odd tingling in his fingertips. He saw a blur, and then meticulous handwriting appeared.

A personal journal,



Covering the period from September 1, 1976 to August 31, 1977

Lily Evans

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry,

Perth & Kinross, Scotland, UK

Harry held the open book in front of Luna. "Did you see that?"

Luna stared intently. "I see a blank page. What do you see?"

"It's my mother's journal, from... her sixth year, I think," Harry said.

Luna said, "You're of her blood, so you can open the book. It makes sense that I am not able to read it. If she opened the book and left it laid open on her bed or her nightstand, someone could have accidentally read it. This way, no one else could ever read what she wrote unless related by blood."

"That seems extreme," Harry said. He idly turned the pages, and revealed line after line of his mother's small and precise script.

"Only someone who never kept a journal of their own would feel that way," Luna commented absently.

Harry set down the book with a jolt. "Do you suppose...? I wonder if Aunt Petunia ever read any of these? That would have been a corker," he said aloud. He winced. "Dudley couldn't have... no, he wouldn't have kept it to himself."

"Aunt Petunia... you lived with your aunt and uncle in the summer," Luna stated.

"I'm afraid I did," Harry said flatly. He picked up the book again. "It'll take a long time to read these. I think I'll finish off Sirius' journal first."

Luna reached for the photo album. She opened to a picture of Harry's father clowning with Sirius, and Lupin looking on. Her fingers traced

across James Potter's face, who flinched and seemed to look for the offending hand. "I recognize Professor Lupin. Is he older than your father? The other... the other is Sirius Black, isn't it?"

Harry lost his words again. It hurt to see the pictures, more than he thought it should.

Luna lightly touched his hand. "Tell me about him," she said. "Tell me about all of them. That is how you keep them alive, you know."

Once Harry found the words, he couldn't hold them in any longer. He talked and she listened until the stereo had long gone silent and the shadows had lengthened. Her lips were pursed as if she were ready to say something. She hadn't spoken since she had prompted him, and he wanted to hear what she had to say. He shifted his weight and the Gringotts box dug painfully into his leg.

He rolled to one side and fished the box out of his trousers pocket. "Imagine that – another box," he said ruefully.

"It's small," Luna said. Harry broke the seal on the lid and the box instantly increased tenfold in size and weight; he nearly dropped it.

"Gringotts sent this," observed Luna. "Do you suppose it's Minister Fudge's head?"

Harry choked before he managed to say, "I don't think so."

"I suppose not," Luna admitted; "The box isn't really head-shaped, is it?"

"Er... should I open it, do you think?" Harry asked.

Luna shrugged. "I have no advice to offer," she said. He pulled back the lid to reveal a parchment envelope addressed to him and a tightly folded cloth of some sort.

Mr. Potter -

Director Ragnok has been told that knowledge of your kin was either withheld or lost. Enclosed is a copy of a tapestry that the Director thought would be of interest. With our compliments.

Fliptrask

“Oooh, it's a family tapestry!” Luna said brightly. “The Potters are a very old family; I imagine the tapestry is quite large.”

“Why do you know that my family is old? Everybody else seems to know these things,” Harry grumbled.

“Perhaps the goblins have made amends for all of us, then?” said Luna. “I do not have to be here for this, Harry. You might prefer to share it with Hermione – she is the sort to take an interest in genealogy, wouldn't you think?”

“Stay,” Harry said.

Luna took up parchment and quill and began to sketch out a massive and complex tree as Harry had his first look at the Noble and Courageous House of Potter. The tapestry was so large that he could only unfold it one panel at a time. It was the antithesis of the Black tapestry: brightly coloured, with a breathtakingly real image for each person included. There was nary an obliterated entry to be found.

As Harry moved into the oldest panel, Luna said, “It's no wonder that you are a Seeker, Harry. Your family's predecessor was the House of Wright.”

“The House of...?” Harry stopped and let his fingers trace upward to the progenitors of his line. The tapestry began with Bowman Wright, the creator of the Golden Snitch.

“This must in some part explain your wealth,” observed Luna. “Bowman Wright had no sons and his eldest daughter married Mathias Potter. Mathias was much older than his wife... oh, see? He was Bowman Wright's apprentice.”

Harry moved down the line of Potter men, from Mathias to Samuel to Brendan to Nicholas to Bartemius and finally to William. “Why doesn't it become the House of Potter until William?” he asked aloud.

“Perhaps it requires a certain number of generations to become a House?” Luna suggested.

“It says that William 'consolidated' these other houses: Molyngton, Piggott and Waldegrave. What does that mean?” Harry wondered.

“This Beatrice Molyngton must have been the last of her line,” Luna said. “If you look over here, the other two families come to an end here and here. The Molyngtons consolidated Piggott and Waldegrave, and then it all moved to William Potter. That's all a guess, of course.”

“Sounds like a brilliant guess to me,” said Harry. “There must be so many stories behind all of this.” As he moved onward, he wondered how Isabel Potter had been 'Lord' of the house for seven years in the 17th century; or why Martin Potter and his son Roger had both died in 1886, one year before the House went from being merely Noble to being Noble and Courageous; or whether it was normal for one House to 'consolidate' so many others. He discovered that Gladys Boothby was his great-grandmother; Luna had to prompt him before he remembered that she had created the Moontrimmer broomstick, which might have explained his modest share of the Comet Trading Company. He came to the last panel and had to set down the bulk of the tapestry – his hands shook too much to hold it. Luna let her hand come lightly to rest on his shoulder.

“My... my grandfather was called Alexander,” he whispered. “My grandmother was called Elisabeth.”

“They were in their sixties when your father was born,” Luna said.

“I had a cousin?” he gasped.

Luna peered more closely at the picture of a young boy named David Potter. “He was quite young when he died,” she said.

“That's why they had my father,” Harry realised. “He was born four years later. The House of Potter needed an heir, right?”

“They loved your father,” Luna said with certainty.

The side panels followed several of the more recent marriages outward to a number of familiar families: Bones, Longbottom, and Greengrass, among others. Madam Marchbanks from the Ministry was something like a great-great-great aunt. The biggest shock was along the Bones line: Susan's great-great aunt Martha Bones had been married to Dumbledore. She had been in her 30s at her death; it was yet another death in 1886.

At the end was an embroidered and very current image of Harry. “I'm Lord Potter, I guess. It all comes down to me,” Harry said.

Luna said, “You've always known that much.”

Harry reverently folded the tapestry and set it atop the counter. “I always felt like I was outside all of this somehow, you know?” he said. “This brings it home: I had a family.”

“You still have a family,” said Luna. She pulled him into a feather-light hug, just close enough to know that she was there if he needed her. After a long while, she told him, “I should go back to the tower.”

“Do you really want to?” he asked.

“I imagine Daddy might be looking for me... or perhaps Ginny,” she said. Harry swore that Luna cringed slightly at the last.

“She can bugger off,” Harry said flatly.

Luna's brow furrowed. “I don't see how she could manage that on her own,” she said. “Buggery requires particular anatomical —”

“Right, we'll be off then,” Harry blurted out, and he leapt to his feet.

They were most of the way back to the tower when they were met by a red blur. It was Ginny, and Harry wasn't pleased to see her or anyone else at that moment.

Ginny drew herself up into a fair imitation of Molly Weasley. "Luna Lovegood! What were you thinking, frightening everyone like that? We thought you'd had a fit and wandered off, or... or maybe they were here... and... and you could have left a note, for Merlin's sake!" She pointed at Harry, and jabbed her index finger into his chest. "And you! Of all people, you should know what happens when people sneak off without telling anyone..." Ginny stopped abruptly, clearly embarrassed.

Harry realised that he had liked St. Ebb better when the wizarding world was far to the south. It didn't feel like it was his anymore. Ron was down on the beach stealing part of it from him, and Ginny was being horrid to Luna, and Harry decided that it was perfectly fine to be angry over all of it.

"Harry, I –" Ginny began cautiously.

"Don't," Harry said crossly.

"I asked Harry to take me out of the tower," Luna said evenly. "Professor Lupin surely knew where Harry was, and Harry is very closely watched. I doubt there is a safer place than this property right now in all of Great Britain. Of course, I was not aware that I suffered fits or was prone to wandering off – thank you for informing me."

"I didn't mean it like that," Ginny insisted. "I just... why did you ask Harry to take you? I mean, I would have gone for a walk with you any time you liked. We weren't forcing you to stay upstairs."

Luna gently rubbed at her throat through her high turtleneck, and looked everywhere except at Ginny. "Have you ever been unable to breathe, Harry?" she asked offhandedly. "It is a new experience for me. It is very unpleasant."

"I can't breathe right now, and I hate it," Harry said bitterly.

Ginny scowled. "Don't tease me, Luna," she said. "No one has been trying to smother you."

Luna smiled. "I had no idea," she said.

"Luna..." Ginny chided.

Luna came to a stop shoulder-to-shoulder with Ginny, but facing in the opposite direction. "Ginny, you have known me since we were very young. You have been nice to me for much of that time. I think that you know me better than anyone alive, excepting my daddy. Reflect on the last two weeks. How should I feel?"

Ginny gave a deep sigh. "Why didn't you say anything? All you had to do was say something."

"You needed something to do with yourself," Luna said. "I thought that you would stop after a few days."

"What do you want from me?" Ginny asked; she sounded defeated.

Luna turned toward her. "I have no need for a nursemaid or a mother. I would like to have a friend; there are so few of them, you know?" Ginny nodded slowly, and then gingerly embraced her. Luna flashed a wry smile at Harry.

Ginny faced Harry and lowered her head. "What I said... it was out of line."

Harry was not in a forgiving mood. "Whatever," he snapped.

Ginny said, "Look... Ron wants to talk to you."

Harry's jaw tightened. He said, "Funny, I don't see him here."

Ginny offered, "He's worried that you might have misunderstood —"

Harry burrowed into her with his eyes. "Does Ron need you to speak for him?"

“He just thought –” Ginny started.

Harry cut her off again. “He didn’t think. That’s the problem,” he said. “Tell him... tell him he’s a coward. If he wants to talk, he knows where to find me.”

Ginny glared at him and snapped, “You’re ruining everything. Tonight could have been fun.”

“Is something happening tonight other than dinner with Remus? No one told me anything,” Harry snapped.

“There wasn’t anything happening, but Heather had an idea and it all just fell together in the last hour or two,” Ginny explained.

“It figures I’d be the last to know,” Harry sneered.

“It’s not as though we knew where to find you,” Ginny protested.

“Ever hear of asking someone?” Harry shot back. “Whatever these plans were, they didn’t include me.”

“Why are you being such a prat?” Ginny shot back. “If you’d take ten seconds to talk to anyone before jumping to conclusions –”

“That’s funny coming from you, Miss Secret Keeper,” Harry snapped.

“There’s the pot calling the cauldron black,” Ginny returned with an edge.

“If Ron wants to talk to me, then he can do it himself,” Harry said. “Obviously, he has something to feel guilty about.”

Ginny balled her fists. “You and my stupid brother... both of you are hopeless! Luna, say something!” she demanded.

Luna said, “Harry has had quite enough to be going on about, without being swarmed upon. I am mildly disappointed in Ronald.”



Ginny said coldly to Harry, "I'll give him your message, but you can guess how he'll react to that word."

"The word was coward," Harry snapped. "While you're at it, tell him that having his sister do his dirty work is pathetic."

"It's one thing to light kindling, and quite another to start a forest fire," Luna sang out, and then added, "Unless you want to burn down the forest, of course."

Harry's eyes squeezed shut. "You're doing it again," he pouted.

"It's your choice, of course," Luna laughed.

Harry opened his eyes and shook his head. "As if I had a choice," he said, and then he smiled. He told Ginny, "Tell him he needs to speak for himself. That's enough."

Ginny gaped at Harry as if he'd just grown a second head. "I don't believe this! You're angry with Ron because he spent time with Heather? Who is the one that stole off with Luna without telling a soul? Who's standing here now, flirting like mad?" She pursed her lips and glared at Luna. "You're much more interested in my brother than in Harry, unless something has changed." She threw up her hands and sighed, "And everyone gives me grief! Maybe Heather and I should leave the lot of you here..." Then she snapped at Luna one last time - "Don't do this," she said - and stormed off.

Harry was quiet for a few moments before he asked, "Were we really flirting like mad?"

"Possibly," returned Luna.

Harry tugged at his shirt collar. "Erm... does that bother you?"

Luna stroked her chin thoughtfully. "No, I see no reason to think of it as a bother," she said.

"Where are you supposed to be going tonight?" Luna went on to ask.

Harry was flummoxed but managed to say, “Wha...?”

“Where are you going?” she repeated.

Harry shrugged. “I haven’t the slightest idea what she was talking about.”

“Ah,” Luna said.

“Remus and your dad and the others are going into St. Ebb for dinner this evening. Why don’t we both go with them?” Harry blurted out.

Luna nodded. “That sounds like a nice respite. I think I should like that... but what of Ginny’s mysterious plans?”

Harry shook his head and said, “No, thank you. You’re better company.” Luna smiled faintly in response.

Harry slowly walked Luna back to the tower and up to the garret. He watched her carefully for signs of faltering but she made the stairs on her own. She opened the door to her bedroom without knocking, and provoked a shriek and cursing from an apparently half-dressed Ginny. Harry quickly turned away from the door, which slammed shut. The door to the washroom opened and Ron strolled out in a threadbare bathrobe. He nearly reached the other bedroom before Harry loudly cleared his throat. Ron whirled around; his expression flowed smoothly from surprise to embarrassment to anger.

“A coward, am I?” he snapped. Harry was surprised to see that Ron had his wand in hand.

“That’s what Ginny was supposed to tell you,” Harry said.

Ron waved his wand menacingly. “What did you tell her?”

“If you’d bothered to show up yourself, I wouldn’t have to tell you,” Harry responded. The anger flowed in him.

“Let’s see... Bill said you were about as pleasant as a splinching, and Professor Lupin said straight out that I should avoid you. I can’t imagine why I wouldn’t come looking for you,” Ron fumed.

“You were on the beach,” Harry accused.

Ron rolled his eyes. “Oh, so that’s the big secret?” He didn’t take notice of the growing quaver in Harry’s voice.

Ron’s tone only made Harry angrier. “Stay away from her,” he demanded.

Ron frowned. “Who do you think you are – her own personal Auror?” Harry advanced on him, and Ron levelled his wand at Harry’s chest. “Back off!” Ron demanded.

Harry’s voice went from quavering to threatening, and he didn’t care. “If you so much as lay a hand on her, I’ll hurt you. You know I can make good on that.”

Ron gaped at him. “You’ve gone ‘round the bend, mate! She told me you were friends, and you stand here acting like the two of you are... are... are handfasted, or something!” He stopped, and scowled. “You’re jealous of me, aren’t you? I don’t believe this! Of all the... gods, Harry! You can’t stand it! You can’t stand that she might think that way of me!”

Harry balled his fists. A part of him longed to strike. “You’re going to hurt her. You damn well know that you hurt Hermione. I’ll bet that you hurt Lavender Brown, and didn’t even see it. It’s all about you now, isn’t it – what you want, what you need. Let me tell you something – Heather’s too good for you, and she’s not going to be one of your two shags a day!”

“That’s what this is all about?” Ron shouted. “Harry, I went down there because Ginny was looking for anyone else that Heather might talk to! You were off training or whatever, and I happened to be there. Do you know what I did? I told her the truth. That’s what she was looking for. Do you know what else happened? She kissed me, once, on the lips.”

Harry's pulse pounded in his ears. Ron kept on, but Harry scarcely heard him. "Will she kiss me again? I have no idea! Do I want her to? Why wouldn't I? Is this some kind of big thing? No! That's not what I'm looking for, and it's not what she's looking for either. She goes off to her thing, I go back to Hogwarts, and that's the end of it! If you have a problem with any of that, then you can just SOD – OFF!"

Harry erupted. "She's too good for you, I said!" he shouted.

Ron snarled, "Well, that would be her decision to make, right?"

Harry reached out his hand, summoned Ron's wand, and tossed it aside. "I won't let you hurt her," he hissed, and then – to his own surprise as well as Ron's – he charged.

Ron said under his breath, "Oh, for the love of..." He dove to one side, and barely escaped Harry's advance.

"Harry, listen to me," Ron said, as he ducked a wild swing. "She kissed me! What part of this isn't sinking in?"

"Git!" Harry yelled. He lunged again, and knocked Ron off his feet. He rolled over him, and slammed his fist into Ron's jaw.

A door flew open. "Stop it! Stop it!" Ginny hollered. "Bill, are you just going to stand there?" Harry crouched, but didn't move to strike again.

Ron cradled his jaw, and muttered, "What makes you think I'm going to hurt her? Her dad's a werewolf – you don't think that's enough to keep me on edge?"

"She's the only person who's ever met me... and liked me... ME, not some bloody freak!" Harry shouted. Ron sat up, his arms lowered to his sides. Harry heard the echo of his own shout, and realised that the corridor was unnaturally silent. The anger slowly trickled out of him, and humiliation burned in its place.

"That's not true," Luna said quietly.

“She’s right – it’s not true,” Ginny agreed.

Harry glared at Ginny. “You couldn’t even speak to me, when we first met, because I was the Boy-Who-Lived,” he said. Ginny didn’t lash back; she just looked wounded. I’m getting good at that, Harry thought bitterly.

“I didn’t start anything – she kissed me,” Ron said. “I’m not going to feel bad about that, Harry. I’m sorry that hurts you. I’m sorry... I’m sorry you’re lonely. I’m sorry –”

“I didn’t say I’m lonely,” Harry snapped.

“Yes, you did,” Luna said.

Ron stood up. “I’m going to get dressed. Bill took Heather home to get ready for tonight. They should be back any minute now.”

“What the bloody hell is with tonight, anyway?” Harry demanded. “Whatever it is, I assume I’m not invited?”

“I assume Heather planned to ask you. Not now, perhaps,” Bill said from the edge of the stairs. The sound of rushing footsteps receded down the stairwell. “Good show, Ron – you handled yourself well. Harry...” He frowned. “I’m worried about you. I think... never mind what I think. You don’t need to explain yourself to me, but I think you owe something to Heather.” Bill pointed over his shoulder at the steps.

Harry stood and descended the steps as though he were sleepwalking. Heather stood against the open door to the library, with her back to him. Harry cautiously reached out and touched her shoulder. Heather flinched, and remained facing away.

Her voice was cold and hard. “You didn’t even look for me, to see how I was,” she said. “You didn’t even look. No... you had to talk to everyone else instead, and make assumptions. Then you ran off with Ginny’s friend. I guess that didn’t work out?”

“Luna is my friend, we didn’t run off, and there was nothing to work out,” Harry said. “She wanted out of the tower, that’s all.”

“Interesting timing – almost like you were playing tit-for-tat,” Heather said. “I suppose I could have looked for you, but I just assumed.”

“You’ve made your point,” Harry said.

“No, I don’t think I have. Ask me how my day has been,” Heather said dangerously. “Go ahead, Harry. Ask me.”

“All right,” Harry said. “How has your day been?”

Heather turned on him, her jaw set. Her voice grew angrier as she spoke. “Oh... same old, same old. You know how it is... the boy I’ve been flirting with is some kind of bloody sorcerer with a price on his head, and the people around him are just as strange. As it turns out, Shona knew about the whole thing. In fact, I was born because she had a summer fling with one of them, and because of that I’m like you lot – or sort of, but not quite. Oh, and the best bit? Her fling was with a werewolf! How the fuck do you think my day has been?”

Harry stepped back and looked at Heather, and wished that he hadn’t. She wore a leather jacket over a closely fitted shirt, a short skirt, and leather high-heeled boots. Her hair was styled into waves, her cheeks were lightly blushed, and her lips were glossy. It was a far cry from sweatshirts and aprons, and Harry fumbled for words. He awkwardly began, “Heather, look...”

She acted as though she hadn’t heard him. “You’re all a mess, all of you. Ron had the decency to admit that. He’s nice. I like him. I thought maybe he could be my holidaymaker, you know – no strings attached?” Before Harry could speak, she added, “He showed me his clippings from your silly teen thing; he was funny about it, really. What he did for Ginny... I think it was crazy and amazing. He’s kind of cute, kind of funny, and more than a little frisky. If he gets something, he wants more. That’s the most normal thing I’ve seen today. But you...” She shook her head. “Just when I think I understand you, I don’t. Ron practically worships you, and you jump him in the corridor! What is wrong with you? What do you want from me? Was I wrong the other day, you know, about your friend on the wall?”

"I don't know," Harry said. He wanted to look at the books, the light above, or the floor – anywhere but at Heather.

Heather threw up her hands, and stood up. "Fine. I can play games, too. I'm going in to Edinburgh tonight. There's a major festival going on right now, two of them really. The Fringe is all over the city and I need to do something I can understand. I rang some of the boys, and they're playing one of the clubs. Burke and Julian will have kittens over the whole thing, which seals it for me. Come if you want. Stay here if you want. I'll enjoy myself either way." She brushed past him, and moved briskly up the steps.

He heard Ginny shriek, "Oh! I am so not ready!", and then a door slammed.

Luna called softly from the steps above, "Harry? Are you still there?"

"I'm here," he said without turning.

"Were you told what is planned for the evening?" she asked. "William explained it to me. Apparently, Ginny had no intention of disclosing anything to me."

Harry clenched his jaw. "I'm not going to just sit here while they go off for the evening. I won't let him think..." He looked at Luna, and everything came together. "We're going to Edinburgh tonight, the two of us."

"You're asking me to come along? We would be going with Ronald and Professor Lupin's daughter?" Luna asked.

"Not a chance," Harry said. "We're going – you and me. If we happen to end up in the same place, I guess I can live with that."

Luna drifted off into a dreamy look. "Edinburgh sits on seven hills, you know – just like Rome," she said. "It is the only old city in Europe completely untouched by the Muggle World Wars. I have never been to Edinburgh."

"So... does that mean you want to go?" Harry asked.

"I imagine Edinburgh is particularly appealing from the back of a motorbike," Luna said.

"Oh... oh, yes, that's good," Harry said. A sly grin spread across his face. "Ron's not going to like this, not a bit."

Luna glanced aimlessly around the room. "Really? Do you think so?"

Harry appraised Luna in a new light. "You're... erm... not exactly what I thought you were. I don't mean that in a bad way! It's just... there's a lot more to you than meets the eye."

"Perhaps you're just seeing things downside-up?" Luna said. "You should ready yourself. Ronald has doubtless changed his wardrobe, having seen Professor Lupin's daughter." Harry nodded, certain that Luna was right. He rushed back to the bothy, stared critically at his shaggy hair in the washroom mirror, and began to clean himself up.



## Chapter Twenty-six

### AN EVENING ON THE TOWN

The evening meal was excruciating. Lupin's offer for Harry and Luna to join his party of four turned at the last minute into an awkward party of eleven, shoehorned into the smaller of the two private dining rooms at L'Oiseau Chanteur. Odd Lovegood fretted openly about his daughter's health, but didn't chastise Harry for taking her from the tower – 'Luna makes up her own mind', Mr. Lovegood declared.

Once again, Ron was turned out like a younger, taller imitation of Bill, sans earring and ponytail. He followed Heather around like an owl delivering posts. Ginny had settled on a black dress. Luna wore a powder blue turtleneck, trousers and white trainers. Harry went for a grey silk sweater and black trousers. He had packed his jacket for the ride, and had been quite surprised when Luna brought out an ancient aviator jacket with all manner of patches stitched onto it. At the dining table, Harry sat next to Luna and near Lupin.

Dumbledore was disconcerted. Harry guessed that neither Lupin's invitation nor Dumbledore's attendance had been purely personal in nature. Lupin was terse and frowning, and Harry eventually realised that it was because of Heather's outfit. Shona made no effort to mask her opinion; within earshot of the table, she asked Heather, "Anything I can do ta help yeh tart up a bit?"

Ted Tonks found the opportunity to fill in Harry on his progress. The funds for repaying the assessments were largely assembled, and Mr. Tonks had already met with more than two-dozen affected parties as well as two of the village councillors. Shona pulled Harry aside at one point and gruffly thanked him for returning the payments.

Harry thought that the food was fabulous. He was surprised how much he had missed his regular meals at the restaurant. Ron did a poor job of concealing his dislike of much of the meal; Heather was quietly but obviously displeased. For his part, Harry thought that Heather had no business spending time with someone who couldn't appreciate Shona's skill.

Heather was subdued throughout the meal; she spoke a bit to Ron and chatted with Ginny. She sat at the opposite end of the table from Lupin and Harry, and Harry had no doubt that was intentional. They made eye contact at one point, but she quickly glanced away and resumed her conversation with Ginny. Harry only heard one word amidst the din: 'violin'.

Just when Harry decided that the situation had reached the height of discomfort, Odd Lovegood spirited him away to discuss the proper context for sexual intercourse in adolescent relationships. The more Harry insisted that nothing remotely like sexual intercourse had happened or was going to happen between he and Luna, the more calmly explicit Mr. Lovegood became. Harry wasn't clear whether Mr. Lovegood was trying to threaten him or to make recommendations. When Harry returned to the table, it was several minutes before he could comfortably look up from his plate.

Unable to arrange a large enough vehicle, Bill had borrowed Mr. Lovegood's van for the evening; clearly, Bill was not thrilled. Lupin interrogated Heather, Bill and Tonks about destinations and times, and took copious notes. Heather barely acknowledged him.

Harry piped up, "Luna and I are travelling separately, on the Bonnie."

Mr. Lovegood cleared his throat. "Luna, are you certain about that?"

"I am quite certain," Luna said. "I am looking forward to it."

"Harry, we'll need to discuss security matters first," Tonks said firmly. Harry nodded in acknowledgement, though he really didn't care to have the discussion at all. Ginny stared daggers, but Harry wasn't sure if they were directed at him, at Luna, or the both of them.

Ron said to Luna, "You've hardly moved in two weeks. How you could possibly be up to this?"

"I walked nearly a mile today," Luna said. "I walked down and up and down the stairs in the tower, and all the way to the cliffs and beyond. I did stop for a few moments on a rise that overlooks Harry's beach. It must be wonderful to have a beach all to one's self." Ginny's fork

slipped from her hand. Bill and Tonks abruptly stopped their side conversation.

Ron's ears reddened. "If you can't be talked into staying behind, then you should ride in the van."

"I immensely enjoyed riding on Harry's motorbike, and I am looking forward to the rest of the ride," Luna said. "In any case, we have our own plans in Edinburgh."

Heather looked up from her plate. "What plans?"

"What if you get tired and slip off?" Ron asked.

"That seems unlikely," Luna said. "I trust Harry. His actions have earned my trust, Ronald." Heather watched Luna with narrowed eyes, Harry noticed.

"What have I done to you?" Ron asked anxiously. "All I've done is look after you for two weeks, and I'm treated like this?"

"Ginny has done most of the looking after. How am I treating you, exactly?" Luna asked. "I simply said that I enjoyed Harry's motorbike, and that he has earned my trust. You're rather defensive."

All the adults at the table watched the exchange with great interest, Lupin in particular. Harry was surprised that neither Luna nor Ron seemed to take notice; he wished that they would.

"Ron's right," Heather said suddenly. "You should ride in the van, Luna. I can ride with Harry. I've ridden with him before, so I know what to expect." What are you doing, Heather? Harry wondered.

Ron smiled, and it was obviously forced. "Mr. Lovegood said it himself – Luna makes up her own mind. If she's set on riding with Harry, I suppose I shouldn't stand in her way."

"No... really, Ron. You were right in the first place. I'll ride with Harry. The back of a motorbike is no place for someone weak," Heather said.

Luna's eyes could make her expressions difficult to read, but Harry was not in doubt. "Weakness is relative," she said airily. "For example, I would be unable to run for even a quarter-mile at present. However, I could transfigure a person into a worm with only modest effort."

"Luna, you're being silly now," Mr. Lovegood chastised her. "Perhaps you might be capable of transfiguring a person into another mammal, but certainly not into a worm. You'll have to be past your N.E.W.T.s before you even think of trying something like that." Harry watched Heather; she didn't visibly react to either the thinly veiled threat or to the clarification.

Harry decided to intervene. "I have the directions," he said. "We might meet you later. Luna, are you ready?"

Luna smiled serenely at Ron. "I'm ready for anything," she said to Harry. "I'm so looking forward to seeing some of Edinburgh." She stopped to kiss her father on the cheek, and then lightly took Harry's hand as they walked out of the dining room. Ron's stare was murderous; for her part, Heather regarded Harry with a faint smirk and shake of her head.

They slipped through the kitchen to the alley, where Harry could discreetly enlarge the Bonnie. Tonks followed closely behind. Shona intently watched Harry walk past her station, and Harry stared back. Her eyebrow rose ever so slightly.

\* \* \* \* \*

Harry gently but firmly grasped Luna's arm as they walked down the steeply sloping West Port. Luna kept staring up at the Castle Rock that loomed above them, a ghostly apparition that cut through the drizzle. Harry was sure she would catch her toe on a cobblestone and fall flat.

When she wasn't looking up, Luna watched the walkers and diners along the sidewalks. She commented on the clothes and the hats and the hair. She picked out the couples that held hands and the men who were cads and the women who were looking for a change. She was a bit too loud and tended to point, but she made for an eccentric

Muggle and not a conspicuous witch. She was funny, witty, occasionally catty, and not terribly loony as far as he could see. For a time, she made him forget the last three days. Nothing on Earth could make him forget the balance of the summer. He enjoyed himself nonetheless and was in no hurry to reconnect with the others.

The West Port opened wide into the Grassmarket, which teemed with people despite the turn in the weather. Harry had offered to transfigure an umbrella but Luna declined; she seemed to enjoy the rain. Motorcars were banned from the area by orange cones and harried traffic wardens, and people occupied every conceivable space. Long winding queues before several shop fronts surely led into restaurants, clubs and the like. Pressed by the crowd, Luna stopped abruptly and tried to blend into the stonework between two shops.

“Are you all right?” Harry asked.

“Yes,” Luna said hesitantly. “I do enjoy watching people, but this is rather overwhelming.”

Harry grinned. “Yeah, I’ve never seen anything like this. It’s great, isn’t it?”

Luna managed a shaky nod.

“You’ve travelled a fair bit, right?” Harry asked. “Crowds can’t be new to you.”

“They’re not, but we avoid larger cities,” Luna explained. “Daddy doesn’t care for the commotion. I... I think that I appreciate his logic.”

Harry held out his hand. “Maybe this will grow on you,” he ventured.

“You like it,” she observed. “All the people, the movement, the noise... you really like all of this. I am confused, Harry. You seemed to prefer solitude.”

“What, because I like being in St. Ebb?” he asked. Thinking for a moment, he added, “I like both, really. It would be fantastic to have a

choice.” Most of the buildings that ringed the Grassmarket were old stone tenements, several stories high. Balconies jutted from the highest floor of a stone building opposite them; there were patio chairs on one, and revellers peering down from another. Harry asked excitedly, “Can you imagine having a flat here? You’d be a few steps from all of this.”

“I doubt it’s like this all the time,” Luna pointed out. “Besides, half the world would be a few steps from you.”

“That wouldn’t matter,” Harry said. “I’m nobody here.”

“Can you teach me to appreciate this?” Luna asked. She took his outstretched hand.

Now Harry did the pointing. Luna seemed steadily less apprehensive, but clung tightly when the crowds grew close. There were dozens of buskers about. They walked past some jugglers. Harry looked closely, and did a double take; they were the same jugglers as in the Muggle market in London.

Harry easily jostled through the crowd, and Luna squeezed his hand until it was nearly numb.

“Oi, who wants to have a go?” one of the gaily clothed men called out.

Harry stepped up. “I took a turn in London a few weeks ago, but I’m game again,” he said.

The juggler pulled his blue top hat low. He looked Harry up and down, and his eyes fixed on Harry’s forehead. “Whitechapel Market, right? Yeah, I remember you. You’ve got the knack. Don’t worry, mate... we won’t make you look too bad. Can’t have that in front of your lady friend, can we?” The juggler winked. Harry was pleased that it was growing dark; surely no one saw him flush.

Harry turned to Luna. “You don’t mind, do you?”

“Do you require my permission?” she asked.

"I just... you know, the crowd..." Harry stammered.

"I am fine," Luna said. She waved to the jugglers and called out sweetly, "Make this as difficult as possible, please."

The other juggler, who wore a black beret, bowed grandly. "As you wish, good lady," he said. A good share of the nearby crowd sniggered. Luna looked on distantly as though she had said nothing.

Harry frowned, and moved tentatively into the ring formed by the onlookers. Without warning, the jugglers flung four rubber balls into the air. Somehow, Harry managed to keep three in the air long enough to get his bearings and guide them into a smoothly flowing pattern.

"Not bad, not bad," the top-hatted juggler said. "We'll have to try harder."

"Much harder," his partner agreed. He tipped his beret jauntily, and reached into an open trunk. Harry nearly dropped the rubber balls when the juggler revealed what looked to be a cannon ball with holes in it.

The top-hatted juggler laughed heartily. "A little ten-pins, eh? Nah... we wouldn't want to break any ickle fingers now, would we?" He whipped out two more rubber balls, and tossed them over Harry's head. Harry managed to snare one of the two, whilst keeping the other three in motion.

"Four is good, four is cracking," the juggler encouraged him. "Oi, Martin, put back the ball and fetch the pins." Out came four bowling pins, deftly flipped one at a time to the juggler in the top hat. As Harry struggled to maintain the four balls in the air, the two jugglers began exchanging the bowling pins. Soon they had worked in two rubber balls, taken out two pins, and then added a whirling chef's cleaver. Harry caught his four rubber balls one at a time, and watched in amazement; the pins were surely slick from the rain and mist, he figured. The two jugglers stopped, and the juggler in the beret gamely held out the cleaver for Harry. Harry took two quick steps back, and the crowd laughed.

“No? Well, you’re a good sport, and a fair juggler, kind sir,” the juggler said loudly. “In the spirit of friendship and good will, we will not make you eat fire.”

“Why not?” Harry asked.

Both jugglers gaped at him for a moment, and then laughed uproariously. Luna tugged hard at Harry’s arm.

“Keep the balls, my friend, as a token of our esteem,” the top-hatted juggler said. They encouraged applause for Harry, and Luna dragged him back into the crowd.

Harry stuffed the balls into the pockets of his jacket. “Luna, what are you...?”

Luna pulled Harry into a hug, which startled him. She thrust her mouth against his ear and whispered insistently, “You were planning to eat fire? Are you mad? You can’t cast a flame-freezing charm in the midst of a crowd of...” The beret-wearing juggler thrust a flaming torch into his mouth. Harry turned so that Luna was facing the action, and he felt her jaw drop.

“Neither can he,” Harry whispered back.

Luna pulled back, her eyes even wider than usual. “An excellent point,” she sing-songed. “I have to know how that is done.” They lingered there a while, but moved on when the jugglers showed no sign of stopping. As they weaved through the throngs of revellers, Luna again gripped him tightly. They passed beyond the Grassmarket and the crowds lightened but Luna never relinquished his hand.

They walked in silence past museums and through part of what proved to be a university campus. The area was still well trafficked, but even more appealing to Harry than the Grassmarket. He turned down a route marked as South Bridge, and spied a harried-looking woman attempting to tug a pram over a threshold and through an open door. He quickened his pace, and Luna followed without prompting.



“Mind if we pitch in?” he asked the woman.

She said, “I’ve done this a hundred times. You’d think...”

“It’s not a bother, ma’am,” Luna said. She held the door wide, and Harry reached down to free the wheels of the pram. The child inside was asleep, and he took care to set the pram gently down on the other side of the threshold. The woman muttered her appreciation and moved inside.

Harry turned back to the door. “It’s a café of some kind. Fancy a hot chocolate?” Luna smiled serenely and nodded. They were seated two tables away from the woman with the pram, who spread books and papers across the table and absently flipped her hair away from her face. Harry was reminded of Hermione setting up camp in the library at Hogwarts.

They waited in silence for the hot chocolate to come. After a sip, Harry said, “Luna, I’ve had a great time.”

Luna said, “As have I. You make for pleasant company.”

Harry took two more sips to calm himself, and then asked the question that had gnawed at the back of his mind all evening. “So... why don’t you tell me what you’re up to?”

Luna slowly swirled her hot chocolate. Each turn of the spoon launched another puff of steam. She was silent for a long while. “This has become so confusing. People are confusing,” she said at last, without taking her eyes off the spoon and the cup. “Perhaps I should stick to Snorkacks. One knows where one stands with a Snorkack, you know?”

Harry had no idea what Luna was going on about, but he wanted to understand. “No, I don’t know. Tell me?” he asked, in hopes of drawing her out.

“Snorkacks in the wild live to be about twenty, about the same as a Kneazle,” Luna said slowly. She steadfastly refused to look up from

the swirling hot chocolate, which had surely cooled to lukewarm at best. “They reach maturity before the age of two. They have no mating rituals, no courtships. They simply mate for life. Snorkacks become intertwined at their very souls, and they are never wrong about their mate – never.”

Harry thought he was onto something. “It would be easier if people were like Snorkacks,” he offered.

Luna looked up from her cup brightly. “You understand,” she said.

Harry said, “Ron’s not the same person that he was, Luna. I’m sorry, but it’s the truth. I doubt he’ll ever be the way...” He trailed off as Luna’s face dimmed.

She said softly, “You don’t understand.”

“I’m trying,” Harry insisted. “This is about Ron, right? I mean, you’ve had a crush on him for ages – long before Hogwarts, I heard.”

“We were like Snorkacks, you know,” Luna said. Her voice became strained and her eyes actually seemed to grow bigger. “Ronald... Ronald couldn’t see it, of course, but I always knew he would. When I fell into his circle – your circle – it simply offered confirmation. Then everything grew dark. First, there was Umbridge, and then the Department of Mysteries, and he changed. You changed. Everything changed.”

“I’m having a hard go of it with Ron,” Harry admitted. “I’ve tried, but I just keep blowing up. I was hoping that we’d patch things up, you know, before the end of the summer. I thought... well, I hadn’t counted on a crowd.”

“I will not cost you your friendship with Ronald,” Luna said. “I can talk to Daddy. We can leave tomorrow. Perhaps you’ll still have the time to mend things? I never intended...”

“How are you responsible for this? This is between Ron and me,” Harry told her.

“Snorkacks don’t know for certain until they mate,” she said absently. “Perhaps that is the problem.”

“Luna, I’m really trying here,” Harry said. He tried hard to keep the exasperation out of his voice. “The Snorkack thing is throwing me off, right?”

“It’s so easy for Snorkacks,” Luna said, her gaze returned to the cup before her. “They’re never wrong... they never compete, they never interfere with another match.” She moved her spoon in idle circles, but steam no longer rose.

“Luna...” Harry began, with an edgy tone.

“I can leave tomorrow,” she said. “I should not intrude upon the fates of others.”

Harry reached for her shaking hands. “Luna, please... just tell me what you’re thinking, straight out. Set aside the Snorkacks, just for a bit?” He smiled and tried to catch her eye.

“I think I may have been wrong about Ronald. This afternoon, I was so...?”

“What... catty?” Harry teased.

“I was not the person I wish to be,” Luna frowned.

“I manage that quite a lot,” Harry said. “It’s not the end of the world.”

Luna continued as though Harry wasn’t there. “I drew you along with me, and you came willingly, and then everything was better, and this evening has been delightful, and... I don’t know what to believe anymore.” She abruptly snapped to attention, and stared at him with an intensity that made Harry instantly uncomfortable. “Our souls intersect; yours and mine – I’ve recognised that for some time. They can not be intertwined –” She stopped abruptly, with the air of someone who had said too much.

Harry felt heat rise from his neck up into his cheeks. He fought the impulse to quickly let go of her hands, and instead cleared his throat. "Erm... Luna, I... er... are you saying... oh, bugger! Are you saying that you fancy me?"

Luna gripped his hands tightly. "I am saying that I feel connected to you, and I can't make sense of it. It scares me, but I am drawn to it. I know what is coming, and I'm not afraid." She summoned the most serious expression Harry could ever imagine crossing her face, and repeated in a whisper, "I'm not afraid. Tell me what you need me to be."

Harry had no idea what to say or do; she'd just placed herself in his hands, like a sacrifice. The room seemed suddenly warm. He wanted to wipe sweat from his brow but didn't dare let go of her hands. Why is my chest pounding? he demanded of himself. It's just Luna. She looked into his eyes expectantly, but he could see fear there. She apparently wasn't afraid of everything swirling around him, even though she should have been. What is she afraid of, then? he wondered. It dawned on him that he hadn't responded to Luna's... to her what? What does she want from me?

"What if I don't know what I need?" he asked. "I'm a bit thick about this sort of thing. Everyone knows that." His voice cracked, and he cringed inside.

"Do they really?" she wondered aloud.

"I think it's common knowledge," Harry said. "You can ask around back at Hogwarts, I suppose."

"I prefer to make up my own mind," she said.

It occurred to Harry that it was much easier to battle a basilisk than to muck around with feelings – just swing the sword and, whatever you do, don't look it in the eye. There was a rushing sound; Harry glanced around for the source.

"Do you hear that?" he asked nervously.

“I hear the rain, and a small child fussing. What do you hear?” she asked in return.

He heard whispers. They seemed to be all around him, just a bit too soft to make out. One of the whispers seemed to emerge from the rest, in a static haze that reminded him of a wizarding wireless warming up. The whisper became a voice – an aching familiar voice.

You have to stop pushing people away.

Harry closed his eyes. He was instantly determined to shut it out. He focused on emptying his mind. For a moment, he wondered why his hands were his focal point; then he shut that thought out as well. For a few moments he was able to push the voice away, back into the whispers. It still sputtered at him in fits and starts.

...you don't want to be alone... cares for you... understands...

He couldn't hold it off any longer. It was miserable – it was like standing before Snape in the dungeons, half-drowned in memories. The voice was around him, behind him, before him, inside him. There was no escape.

Give into it.

It wasn't real, it couldn't be real – he knew that. He knew it was Voldemort invading his mind, stronger than ever. Sirius was dead, and that was the end of it.

You-Know-Who isn't taking your life away, lad. You're throwing it away. I thought you had more sense.

“Use his name,” Harry snarled aloud.

Luna stroked the back of his right hand. “Harry...?”

As hard as it is to see people hurt, it's ten times harder to go it alone. Damn it, Harry... think about the power you need... think...

"I won't listen, I won't! It's not you... it was never you – it was just Voldemort in a cheap suit!" Harry insisted. He focused his mind as strongly as he could.

He felt Luna's hand on his cheek; she brushed away something warm and wet. "Harry, open your eyes and look at me. You are sitting in a café, drinking hot chocolate. It is raining outside. We are most likely going to meet Ronald and Ginny and William and Miss Tonks at a club of some sort. Can you hear me? Do you hear what I am saying?" Her voice was even and steady, and he heard it clearly. He managed an unsteady nod and then opened his eyes.

A man in an apron stood next to the table with a look of concern. "Er... hate to barge in, but is there a problem here?"

Harry moved to speak, but Luna moved her fingers from his cheek and brushed back his wet bangs.

"Everything will be fine," she said. "My friend has seen some terrible things, sir. It all rushes back to him at the most peculiar times."

The man hesitated, and then looked at Harry sadly. "When my brother came back from war, he was in a bad way for the longest time. You saw someone killed, lad?"

Harry bristled when the man said 'lad', but managed to nod.

"Awful times we live in, awful times," the man said. "You're lucky, though. My brother had to go it alone, more or less. You've got your young lady friend to help you along." Luna smiled and Harry attempted to smile back.

"Thank you for your concern," Luna said. "I hope we weren't a bother."

"Not at all, miss," the man said. "It's my job to watch for strays." He turned to Harry. "Sorry, but I have to ask... do you have a headache?"

A chill climbed up Harry's back. "No, I don't," he said cautiously.

The man smiled. "Never forget that you have friends. There are always people looking out for you." He winked, and briskly walked to the kitchen.

"What the...?" Harry blurted. Luna slid in her chair as Harry brushed past her hand, and dashed after the man. He blazed into the kitchen, to the startled shrieks of three cooks and a runner. There was no sign of the man in the apron.

Luna waited for him just outside the kitchen entrance. "He is gone, I presume?"

"Did you hear... what...?" Harry spluttered.

Luna shrugged. "Did you really think they would let you wander about a large city with me as your only line of defence?"

Harry scowled. "I figured there would be watchers. Please tell me you're not in on it?"

Luna shook her head. "Certainly not. The Headmaster appears capable of smothering you without my help. I made a game of looking for them at first, but decided that I preferred talking to you."

"We should go," Harry said flatly. "I'm sure that fellow will have ratted me out to Tonks by now."

"Is that how you see it?" Luna asked.

"I suppose I do," Harry answered. He went to leave the café, and pulled hard at the door for several moments before Luna pushed it open. He stormed down the sidewalk. Luna grasped his hand and somehow managed to keep up.

After a few blocks, Luna tugged on Harry's hand. "I can't... I'm sorry, but... I just... too fast..." she panted.

Harry stopped. "I wasn't thinking," he said. "I'm good at that." He spied a stone planter under an awning and led Luna there to sit and

rest. She insisted that he sit as well, though there was barely room for the two of them. She shivered. Harry looked around carefully, before he took his saddlebags from his pocket and enlarged them. He dug inside, found Luna's aviator jacket, and draped it around her shoulders.

"Why are there runes on your hand?" Luna asked him.

"Um... I'm sorry?" Harry managed.

"Three runes have been placed on the back of your right hand," Luna observed. "I noticed them when you were distressed. Do they afford some kind of protection?"

"I wish I knew," Harry said ruefully.

"What an interesting answer," Luna sing-songed. "You haven't enrolled in Ancient Runes, I'm sure. Few Gryffindors do."

"And I suppose all Ravenclaws do?" Harry teased as he held out his hand.

"My father has tutored me in Runes," Luna said absently. "Gebo... how unusual."

Harry cleared his throat nervously. "I suppose I'm fated to be trampled by rampaging hippogriffs, or something?" he joked.

Luna stared at him blankly for a moment, and then resumed her examination of his hand. "This is not Divination... not that Divination is, of itself, flimsy or ridiculous. Professor Trelawney, however, is quite ridiculous; I completely agree with Hermione on that point." She looked up again, animated this time. "Runic symbols are imbued with magic. They are tangible and quite serious. The acceptance of gebo by a wizard requires selflessness, which is rare. In combination with the other runes..." She tapped the back of his hand, and her face took on a look of concentration that appeared painful; then her eyes widened. "These are not for your protection. You are protecting —" She stopped in mid-sentence, and watched him expectantly.



Harry snatched his hand free. "Let's change the subject."

"Was Sirius Black talking to you?" she asked abruptly.

Harry wasn't sure he could ever get used to Luna's bolts from the blue; they were so hard to evade. "How did you guess...?"

"'Voldemort in a cheap suit', you said. I would have called it gaudy, instead of cheap," she said.

"It wasn't Sirius. It's Voldemort – it has to be," Harry growled. "I don't know how he's doing it, but has to be him. I'm so tired of this. I just want it to be over."

Luna draped her arm around him. "Why does it have to be Voldemort – on account of the dream?" she asked.

He wanted to push her away, but he didn't. "I'm so sorry for everything that happened," he said.

"You have no reason to offer me an apology. I've stood with you twice, and I will stand with you again," Luna said. "You said to the minder that you had no headache. I was told that you suffered terrible headaches last year, when Voldemort intruded in your mind."

Harry frowned. She was right, of course, but he didn't have to like it. "Who else could it have been?" he grumbled.

"Why couldn't it have been Sirius Black?" Luna asked.

Harry stared at her dumbly. Part of him wanted to be angry with her for toying with him. Part of him wanted to laugh off the idea – even the Quibbler wouldn't print this one, he thought. A small part of him wanted desperately to cling to the idea, to believe that Sirius had somehow spoken to him from beyond the veil.

"It can't be him," Harry whispered hoarsely. "He fell through the veil, Luna. I watched him... he fell through... it can't be him." He raised his voice, and it cracked with rising anger. "I can't even have my memories of him. Voldemort won't even leave me those."

They sat there, side by side, staring straight ahead. Luna tightened her hold on him and he didn't resist. "Harry... you heard the voices, the whispers," she reminded him. "They're all right there, just behind the veil. He risked everything for you. He must have loved you. Why couldn't it have been him?"

Harry felt so unsettled that he nearly shook. He licked his dry lips, and asked nervously, "Have you ever heard... has your mother ever... you know, spoken to you?"

"If she had, would that make a difference to you?" Luna returned.

"I might not think I'm a complete lunatic!" Harry blurted.

"Then you're not a complete lunatic," Luna said. "You have considerable potential in that area, of course, but I expect it will go unrealised..." She stopped, and looked at him with a mix of curiosity and surprise.

"What? What did I say?" Harry asked.

"I nearly missed it. You used me as a reference standard for your sanity. I am flattered," Luna said.

"Half the wizarding world thought I was a nutter last year," Harry chuckled. "We make a good pair, I think."

She turned and smiled at him. "Downside-up thinking seems to suit you," she said.

"I suppose it does," Harry admitted. "Just don't point out any, erm... fezziwigs, right?"

Luna's expression grew grave. "Oh... that's quite unlikely. I dearly hope you never see one."

Harry stifled a laugh. "Do you know what I need right now?" Harry asked.

Luna sat up straighter. "Tell me."

"I need to get out of the rain," Harry said. "We may as well find them, before they find us."

"Do you think that Ronald will look for us, if we linger too long?" Luna asked.

Harry suppressed a smile. "Erm... I wasn't thinking of Ron. No, I expect the minders are in full force now." He stood, and extended his hand to her. "I'll go more slowly this time – I promise."

Within a block, Harry was certain that they were being closely followed. Probably just the bloody minders, he figured, but there's no reason to take a chance. He guided Luna into an adjacent alleyway and cast quick silencing and befuddlement charms where the alley opened to the lane.

"What is it? Did you see something amiss?" Luna asked. She brandished her wand apprehensively.

"Do you trust my Charms?" he muttered.

She hesitated for a moment, but said, "I trust you."

"With Glamour Charms, we might go unrecognised," Harry suggested.

Luna asked, "Have you cast one before?"

"We had to cover a half-dozen basic glamours for the O.W.L.s," Harry said. "I did reasonably well."

"Are you certain that this is necessary?" Luna questioned.

"We're being followed," Harry returned sharply. "I didn't manage to count them, but there are several."

Luna looked at him strangely. "When I asked my housemates about the O.W.L.s, I was told that glamours were reserved for the N.E.W.T. examinations," she said slowly.

“They said that, did they?” Harry fumed. “Your housemates were having you on, apparently.” He looked to his wand, reviewed the charm in his mind, felt a flutter of nervousness, and asked, “Shall we?”

“Try not to think of food while casting the charm,” Luna said earnestly. “I wouldn’t care to look like a parsnip.”

He focused his thoughts. He saw Luna with smaller eyes, longer and darker hair, and fuller features, and managed to cast the charm before his mind was filled with the image of Ron eating. Then he conjured a pocket mirror; it didn’t have a frame, but at least the edges weren’t sharp.

Luna’s disguised cheeks flushed. “I look like my mother,” she whispered.

“I... I didn’t know! I can change it, it’ll only take a moment,” Harry quickly offered.

She gazed into the mirror and smiled. “No, thank you,” she decided. “It’s your turn.”

Older, he thought, I want to look older – five years or so. Keep the hair the way it is, a little taller, brown eyes instead of green. He cast the charm.

“What do you think?” he asked hesitantly.

Luna looked at him very carefully, taking in every part of his face. “I think that no one will expect to see my mother walking with your father,” she concluded. “Shall we?”

The club they were seeking – the Cabaret Molière – was a few blocks farther beyond the Uni. It was on one side of a close. Harry nearly failed to spot it at first – there was only a sign hung above a wrought-iron gate to mark its location; the long, snaking queue gave it away. The heavy gate barred a dark passage into the ground floor of one of the slender stone tenements that lined the close. Two hulking men

hovered before the gate; they looked surly and bored. Harry's eyes darted along the rooftops, and then swept the queue. The close was narrow, the rooftops were high, and his breathing was shallow and fast.

They held back from entering the close. Harry preferred to remain cloaked in shadow. Luna stood beside him. "Perhaps we should simply return to St. Ebb?" she offered.

"Like it or not, we're surely expected," Harry grumbled.

Luna leaned forward slightly, and looked at the crowd without blinking. "Irony, isn't it, that so many of them are dressed like wizards? It appears that we are fashionable."

Harry scanned the queue again, and recognised that she was right. A number of people were wearing dark cloaks or long coats. There were even a few dresses and tunics that would have been inconspicuous in Hogsmeade. He continued to look for signs – people out of place, flickers of movement, any hints of magic.

"Your unease is palpable," Luna observed.

"You'd think someone would have waited outside for us," he said. "Something doesn't feel right."

Luna said nothing, but shifted into place behind him. He felt her shoulder graze against his back. There was a faint pop! and Harry whirled around, just as Luna jabbed her wand into the chest of a dark-robed figure.

Snape let out an audible gasp but quickly recovered. "My colleagues would approve of your vigilance, Miss Lovegood," he sneered. "You, on the other hand, should not have turned to face me. She has your back, and I presume that you were to have hers. Disappointing, Potter. Predictable, but disappointing."

"You Apparated alone into our immediate vicinity, which suggested that you were not a Death Eater," Luna said. "If I had thought otherwise, you would no longer be standing, Professor."

Snape's lip curled into a crooked smile. "I award five points for your logic and your pluck," he spat, "but I take five points for your unfortunate taste in friends."

"It is good that you evened the score, Professor," Luna said earnestly. "It would be unfair to reward or punish a student's entire house while on holiday."

Snape glared at her. "Potter's cheek is already contaminating you – a great pity. I, unlike most of your peers, am able to gauge capacity without consideration for aesthetics. I do hope that your insistence on fraternizing with... Gryffindors – " Snape grimaced, as though speaking the name of Harry's house burned his tongue. " – does not compromise your performance in my classroom. You would do well to limit yourself to Granger, Bell or the youngest Weasley. The rest are layabouts and buffoons."

"What do you want, Snape?" Harry angrily demanded.

"What do I want?" Snape mocked. "At present... larger chambers, competent students and an umbrella. I stand before you with all my wants unfulfilled. My task this evening is simple, and an utter waste of my time and abilities. I am to escort you into a Muggle club, so that you may partake of loud music, consume questionable beverages, and writhe lasciviously. I intend to take my leave as quickly as possible. Do you have any more ridiculous questions, or are you tapped out for the evening, Potter?"

"They could have sent someone else. Why you?" Harry snapped.

"Your grasp of the obvious is a testament to your house," Snape mocked. "It appears that I blend in with the riffraff this evening, despite wearing perfectly normal attire." He shook his head. "You're expected inside. Move." Snape swept to the front of the line with a sneer and a swish of his cloak, oblivious to the grumbling behind him.

One of the revellers in the queue suddenly perked up and pointed. He was older and clad in biker leathers, and looked a bit out of place. "Bloody hell! It's Alice bloody Cooper!" he shouted. Everyone within

earshot turned his or her eyes on Snape, whose sneer twisted slowly into a snarl. Harry remembered the name and the face that went with it, from Sirius' stacks of record albums; he scarcely stifled a snort.

"I don't care if it's effin' Queen Maggie," growled a large man behind the gawkers. "No jumpin' the queue!" Harry could sense a cloud of frustration looming over the entire crowd. He gripped his wand tightly.

Luna took a step backward and pulled Harry with her, as Snape clenched and unclenched his fists. Suddenly, the Potions professor snapped at the queue, "Alice? Alice? I am not feminine in – the – slightest!" He turned quickly to the hulking bouncers, whipped his cloak extravagantly to one side, and shouted, "Well?" This time, Harry couldn't hold back the laughter.

One of the bouncers grunted something that sounded vaguely like 'They're with Heather', and the other swung open the gate. Most of the front of the queue openly grouched, but the man holding open the gate silenced them with one withering glance. Harry nearly bumped into Snape as they pressed forward into the entryway.

They made their way down a short flight of dimly lit stone steps, amidst the muffled echoes of drums and a wailing guitar. A third enormous man stood before a huge oaken doorway. He nodded at them, and opened the door wide. Harry winced for a moment at the assault of blaring music, but regained himself. He tugged at Luna's hand. She hesitated until Snape glared at her, and then followed Harry inside.

Snape hissed something at Harry but it was lost in the din. For his part, Harry wasn't sure he wanted to hear anything else that Snape had to say. Against his better judgment, he leant in and cupped his hand to his ear.

Snape scowled, and then moved still closer until his breath burned against Harry's cheek. "I see your little pet is showing off. You should look into a sturdy kennel, Potter - she must be a wolf in sheep's clothing, after all."

Before Harry could react, Snape menacingly swished back his cloak and disappeared into the teeming crowd. Luna gave Harry a questioning look, and abruptly shrunk back. Harry figured that he must be wearing his double-Potions face, and tried to settle himself. He didn't want to look at the stage; he didn't want to take Snape's bait. He looked, despite himself, and everything else receded.

Heather was standing back, while a man sang. He was tall, with thick longish hair, strong arms, and artfully torn denims. For an instant, the vision of a young Sirius rushed into Harry's mind. He shook it off, but there was something vaguely familiar about the man. He stopped singing and Heather moved forward. She wielded a bright blue electric guitar like it was a weapon; her left hand squeezed it by the neck and her right arm worked like a windmill. The result was a punctuated explosion of sound. She jumped up and down, flung around, and did half a dozen other things incompatible with a short skirt – and it was plain that she didn't care. She was powerful and she was angry. Harry immediately wondered what Ron had done.

Harry forced himself to look at the rest of the stage – anywhere else. There was a drummer, as well as another person with a host of drums and bells and blocks of wood and other things that Harry didn't recognise. A large man with a topknot stood off to one side amidst a stack of keyboards. A small slender fellow wearing what Harry figured to be a bass stood stock-still next to the drummer. A woman with big blonde hair and little more than half a shirt stood before a microphone opposite the keyboard player. The male singer had a guitar, as well; he strummed it calmly by comparison to Heather.

Heather seemed to settle down and the song returned to a consistent pattern. The singer slung his guitar to one side, seized the microphone – stand and all – and began to wail something. 'Teenage wasteland' was all that Harry could catch amidst the blare and the echoes. There was someone else behind the blonde singer, hunched over, with headphones half-buried in long red hair. Harry stared intently until Luna began to tap insistently on the back of his shoulder.

"What?" Harry shouted over the song.



“Go – up – there,” Luna mouthed, and pointed to one side of the stage.

“Why?” Harry shouted.

Luna cupped her hand around the back of his head, and drew him in close. “We should find out why Ginny is sitting on the stage,” she shouted in his ear. “I believe that I see Bill, but I see no sign of Ronald. That may be an ill omen.”

Harry harrumphed. “Heather dumped him... or he dumped her – the twit! Tonks is probably trying to calm him down,” he concluded.

“We must locate him,” Luna insisted. “It is very crowded in here. None of us should be alone.”

Harry ducked and weaved through the crowd massed before the stage. Luna nearly tore his arm off in her attempt to remain close. They moved around to one side of the stage behind the speakers. It was still loud, but much easier to hear voices. The crowd parted for a moment and Harry nearly ploughed Bill to the floor.

“What the... Harry! We were beginning to wonder,” Bill said. “Er... where’s Snape?”

Harry frowned. “Don’t worry – he was exactly where our mutual friends wanted him to be.”

Bill rolled his eyes. “For goodness’ sake, Harry; you know you’re going to be watched. There’s no getting around it. Remus was in a panic wondering what had happened to you. He’s around here somewhere, and Kingsley as well. They’re trying to establish a perimeter or something.” He looked around the crowded space. “Not exactly the sort of place to manage that.”

“So... you heard about my little episode in the café, then?” Harry fumed. “I’m surprised Dumbledore isn’t here.”

“Haven’t seen him. Tonks asked Snape to wait outside for you – that’s all I know for certain,” Bill said. “Come to think of it, Tonks

made certain Ron was out of the way before she... oi, what's this about a café?"

"It's not important," Harry said quickly. "Where is Ron, then?"

Bill sighed. "He's milling about. I've given up keeping an eye on him. Frankly, I should probably let up for a while."

"What did he do now?" Harry asked.

"Very nice, especially coming from you," Bill said with a scowl. He seemed to struggle for more words, and finally said, "I think he's trying to be like me. Actually, he's trying to be like his image of me, and that's a bigger problem."

Luna nudged Harry. It was indeed Ginny on the side of the stage. She doffed the headphones, leant over, and came up again with her violin and bow. Something was clipped to the body of the violin, connected to a wire that ran to a black box at Ginny's waist. Her expression was so intense that Harry took in a sharp breath.

"It's not enough to pick up the pieces Ron leaves behind – on top of that, I've got Ginny to look after," Bill grouched. "She won't let me touch that damned violin, you know. It has to be cursed somehow. Look at her! She can't set it aside for an hour without pining for it. Besides, Heather was right; it's impossible to master a musical instrument so quickly."

"Erm... Sirius did say it wasn't cursed," Harry said. His godfather's name felt wrong in his mouth, and his hate for Voldemort grew.

Bill's eyes flashed. "Sirius said a lot of things, and they weren't all true," he snapped. "Dash it all, I'm going to put a stop to this." He took two steps toward the side of the stage, before Luna wandered idly into his path.

"It would be best not to trifle with Ginny just now," she offered.

Bill glanced at his sister, who now stood beside the blonde singer and was rocking from side to side. He flinched. "Crikey! She does look like the kneazle just died, doesn't she?"

"She's terrified," Luna said, "and she'll take it out on the first person who gets close."

Bill looked at Luna with what seemed to Harry like mild horror. After a moment, he sank. "Ginny's changed," he said. "Not just this summer, either; I hardly know her now."

"How old was Ginny when you left home?" Luna asked.

Bill flushed. "Er... six? No... no, she was seven."

"Quite a lot happens in a girl's life between seven and fifteen," Luna said dreamily. Bill stared at her, while Harry shrugged and turned his attention to the stage.

The singer stopped again, and he and Heather duelled one another with their guitars. He overpowered her, and Harry figured that she had let him win. Ginny stepped rigidly out onto the stage next to Heather. She raised the violin to her chin, held the bow expectantly, and watched Heather's eyes. Heather's gaze darted to the singer, and then to Ginny, and she nodded. The guitar quieted, and Ginny's violin sang through the speakers. For a few notes, it seemed like everything else in the room came to a stop; as her pace quickened, the drummers and the bassist and then the guitars joined back in. Ginny kept playing a little faster, and a little faster, and a little faster still. The singer-guitarist began to grin, and then broke into a full-blown smile.

Ginny visibly relaxed and leant forward into her violin. Her head bobbed, and grim determination was replaced by something that Harry couldn't quite name – not happiness, not joy, but something equally compelling. Within a few notes, Ginny bobbed and weaved along with Heather. Heather looked to the drummer, held up four fingers, and received a crisp nod in return. She nudged Ginny, showed the same four fingers, and Ginny nearly laughed. For their

part, the crowd began to hoot its approval – this only seemed to spur Ginny and Heather on.

Heather nodded again, and the song moved into what Harry realised was a finale – after two weeks of immersion in Sirius' records, Harry more or less understood the elemental rules of pop music. Ginny joined in with the rising frenzy of guitars and keyboards and drums. When it all ended on a single powerful note, the throng in front of the stage went berserk.

During the song, Ginny had looked as though she'd been doing this for her entire life. When the cheers erupted, Harry thought that for a few moments she faded back into the Ginny he remembered from his third and fourth year – wide-eyed, nervous, and somewhat uncomfortable in her own skin. Heather let her guitar slide onto a stand with an amplified clang, and gave Ginny an excited one-arm hug.

The singer bowed to Ginny and clapped. Heather sauntered to the microphone, and yelled enthusiastically to the crowd, "You can do better than that!" She grabbed Ginny's hand, and pulled it up into the air like she was the victor of a duel. "Jean Prewett, everybody!" The applause erupted again, and Bill's face quickly shot from normal to red to violent purple. "And our new mate Kirley McCormack on vocals and guitar!" The applause took on a decidedly female tone, Harry noticed.

Abruptly, Tonks was beside Bill. "I knew it! I told you it was Kirley –" She stopped in mid-sentence and gave Bill a concerned look. "Breathe," she told him.

"She used Mum's family name," Bill snarled. "She had no right, damn it!"

Tonks wrapped an arm around Bill. "She was smart to use a different name," she said quietly. "It might have been the only one that came to mind. What would you have preferred – Ginny Potter?" Harry briefly flashed crimson and Bill spluttered wordlessly, as Ginny came off the stage. Luna rushed to greet her.

Ginny hesitated, and then squinted. "Luna? You look so... different."

Luna shrugged. "It's just a glamour. Ginny, that was astounding – a tour-de-force!" she sing-songed.

Ginny tightly clutched her violin, and broke into a toothy grin. She gushed, "I - don't - know - I - felt - a - bit - off - you - see - I - wasn't - sure - about - the - tuning - and - I - mean - I - know - I - can - pick - up - almost - anything - by - ear - in - one - go - but - to - turn - around - and - play - it - in - front - of - people - isn't - exactly - something - I - planned - to - do - and - then - Heather - gave - the - sign - to - stretch - it - and - I - almost - fainted - dead - away - can - you - imagine - living - that - one - down - and - thank - Merlin - everyone - was - patient - with - me - and - isn't - the - drummer - just - gorgeous?" She gasped for air, blushed furiously, and then burst out laughing. Luna twittered about something that Harry couldn't quite make out, and joined in the laughter far too loudly.

Heather strode toward them with a big smile. "Now there's a debut to remember!" she boomed, and pulled Ginny into another one-armed hug.

The singer sidled up to them. "I'm learning the hard way that Heather is always right," he said. He bowed extravagantly to Ginny and added, "It was an honour and pleasure, milady."

Ginny giggled, but then turned serious. "The honour is mine," she said. "I'm glad I had the chance to play with you."

Tonks had an irrepressible smile on her face, as she squeezed between Ginny and the singer. "Wotcher, Kirley! I'm a big fan of your, um, other work," she gushed.

The man's eyes bulged. "I see... Miss...?"

"Tonks," she returned brightly, "just Tonks."

He nervously shook her hand. "Um... Kirley," he said. "Of course, it seems you knew that already ..."

Harry goggled, and understood why the man had looked vaguely familiar – it was Kirley Duke, the guitarist for the Weird Sisters. It appeared that he was using his mother's family name, as well.

Bill stepped in to the fray. "Bill Weasley," he said, and thrust forward his hand.

"Weasley..." McCormack said distantly. "Weasley! You've a brother by the name of Charlie?" Bill nodded, and smiled faintly.

McCormack turned to Ginny. "Then you must be... well... this is a bit of a shock..." He moved close to Bill. Harry heard him mutter, "Does she know?" as he inclined his head toward Heather.

Harry was about to intervene, but Bill said quickly, "Er... she's a friend of my sister, right? As it turns out, she has some of our kind in her extended family. She doesn't ask, we don't tell... but she knows."

McCormack's eyes widened. "I'll be switched!" he said in a forced whisper. He turned to Harry. "And you are?"

Before Harry could speak, Tonks stammered, "This is... erm... a schoolmate of mine... uh... Podmore... James Podmore. Say, Jimmy, this is Kirley... er... McCormack." Harry recognised what Tonks was trying to do, and didn't reveal who he was. Instead he smirked knowingly and shook McCormack's hand. "I'm a fan," he lied, and then added, "So... erm... how did you fall in with her?" with a nod toward Heather.

"She works for Keith MacLeish – eh, surely you know about MacLeish," McCormack said quietly. "My former band works for him as well through, shall we say, a different subsidiary. After I went on the outs with them, MacLeish offered me a solo contract on condition that I also work with Heather." He smiled broadly. "MacLeish and his people think I'll be able to cross over, you know, into Muggle music – I had no idea how many have done it." He looked toward Heather, and added conspiratorially, "She's sharp, and bloody creative, and her voice is ridiculous. She can sing almost anything and pull it off, which is the problem. MacLeish's people don't know what to do with

her. She's not been a lot of help in that department; it's been a rocky start for me, I can tell you. Not one of them ever said anything about her knowing – you know what I mean?"

Heather sauntered over. "Getting saucy with Kirley, are you?" she teased Tonks. "Don't feed his ego – guitarists take care of that on their own." She gestured to Harry. "So, who's your friend?" The moment that she took a good look at him, her jaw slackened.

"Erm... Jimmy Podmore," Harry said quickly. "Tonks and me are old school chums."

"But you're... you can't... Harry said..." Heather babbled.

Ginny followed Heather's stare to Harry's face. Her eyes widened for an instant, and then she cut in. "Would you excuse us?" she said to Harry sweetly, and led Heather by the arm toward the secluded sidestage.

McCormack shook his head, as Heather walked away. "She's been in a right state tonight," he sighed. "Skeet said she had a really bad day, or something."

"It looks that way," Tonks said idly. She motioned to Harry. "Say, Jimmy, some of my mates are dying to see you." Harry took the hint, and Tonks led him circuitously to the sidestage.

As soon as he arrived, Heather shoved at him rudely. "You scared the life out of me!" she snapped. "It's not like I expected to see your father!" Ginny was openly staring at him. Luna was wearing her own face now.

"It's a glamour – a disguise," Harry said. "We were in a hurry. I didn't plan it, all right?"

"Why a disguise?" Heather asked.

Ginny started to speak up, but Luna answered, "Harry had an unusual experience while we were making our way here. We decided it would be best to alter our appearance."

Heather looked to Luna suspiciously, and pursed her lips, but finally nodded in acceptance.

“Look, I’m sorry we took so long to get here...” Harry began. Heather immediately bristled, and he had no idea why.

Ginny cut in. “Where’s Ron?” she asked.

Heather rolled her eyes and said flippantly, “He’s off sampling the buffet.” She squinted, and then pointed to the back of the room. Harry followed her direction, and spotted Ron. He was leaning against the bar, in animated conversation with three young, flashy and incompletely dressed women.

Harry gaped at Ron and then at Heather. He wanted to shout at her – at both of them, really – but she had already moved on. She set about gathering the band to plan out the next set, her eyes wide and hands in constant motion.

“There you are, at last!” Lupin called out from behind Harry. Harry turned, and Lupin stopped in his tracks.

“It’s just a glamour,” Harry said quickly.

Lupin frowned. “Change it,” he demanded. “Now.”

Harry retreated to the corner, and angrily cancelled and recast the charm without concentrating. When he turned around, Tonks laughed nervously.

“That’s not funny, Harry,” Lupin said, his arms crossed, and then chuckled in spite of himself. “All right, it might be a bit funny.” Harry stared dumbly at them, and Lupin conjured a small mirror. The face of Severus Snape stared back at Harry, and he breathed in sharply.

“Don’t just stand there,” Tonks laughed. “Say something.”

Harry gazed into the mirror, and sneered, then curled his lip several times. “This is so wrong,” he said, and his voice cracked.



"That wasn't very convincing," teased Tonks.

Harry practiced an icy glare, and then cleared his throat. "Fifty points from Gryffindor, Mr. Lupin, simply for being you," he snapped. When Tonks laughed, he whipped his head toward her, raised his nose, and sneered, "Miss Tonks, do you honestly believe that your pathetic conversation is more important than the subtle art of potions? Fifty points for disrupting my classroom, and a week of detentions." Now Lupin laughed, and Tonks responded by sticking out her tongue.

Harry ploughed on. "Three thousand points from Gryffindor, Mr. Potter, for continually interfering in my opportunities to kiss the Headmaster's – " A hand came to rest on Harry's shoulder. Lupin looked past Harry and clapped his hand over his mouth, while Tonks winced.

"Why, Severus, I believe you have lost your sense of proportionality," Dumbledore said jovially. "You have never sought more than a thousand points from Mr. Potter at any one time."

Harry turned on him. "A thousand points!" Dumbledore waggled his wand. The space around the four of them became hazy, and the noise of the club receded.

"I prefer to see you as yourself, Harry," Dumbledore observed, and Snape's face was gone with another waggle of the Headmaster's wand.

"I'm responsible," Lupin said. "I told Harry to change his glamour."

"I am aware of that," Dumbledore told him. "I imagine that you were shocked just now, Remus, but it was simply the result of an elementary concealment. Keep in mind that within a few years, Harry will look remarkably like the James Potter that you remember."

"You didn't intend it?" Lupin asked Harry.

"No! I just wanted to look older, and to hide my eyes," Harry insisted.

Lupin regained himself. "You have the most amazing timing, Albus," he observed.

"It is merely a coincidence," Dumbledore said, "although it may appear that I defy coincidence from time to time. An improbable coincidence should always be closely evaluated. The appointment of a prominent wizarding musician to Miss Magruder's troupe by a very prominent wizard is an example of such an improbability."

Harry did a double take. "You know about that already?"

"I recognised young Mister Duke almost immediately," explained Dumbledore. "Without facial hair, his appearance remains similar to that of his school days. The rest was easily surmised. We shall have to discuss Mister MacLeish prior to your meeting, Harry."

Great – that way you can make more decisions for me, Harry thought. "That doesn't explain why you're here," he said, and quickly added, "Nothing's the matter."

"One of our colleagues had a different impression," Dumbledore responded impassively.

"He was wrong," Harry said flatly.

"I wonder what Miss Lovegood would have to say?" Dumbledore mused aloud.

"She would say that I had Sirius on my mind," Harry shot back, "not that it's anyone else's concern."

"Your safety is paramount," Dumbledore returned. "That is always my concern, and the concern of our mutual friends."

Harry balled his fists. "Friends – you mean the 'old crowd'? They're your friends. They were my mum and dad's friends. They're not my friends; if they were, things would be different."

"Your safety is paramount," repeated Dumbledore calmly, "and you know very well why that is the case, as does our present company."

You are at increasing risk in St. Ebb, and this venue is only acceptable because the crowding and confusion also works against our adversaries. Now – you say that thoughts of Sirius caused you enough distress to draw out our colleague?”

“I didn’t see Voldemort, I didn’t hear him... I didn’t even smell him. Are you satisfied?” Harry fumed.

Dumbledore asked, “Do you need to talk to someone with regard to Sirius’ passing, perhaps someone unbiased who might be able to help – ”

Harry felt the anger well up inside, and it exploded. “Where was that offer six weeks ago, when I was rotting at the Dursleys? ” he thundered.

Lupin frowned. “Harry, that’s enough,” he said.

Harry glared at Lupin, but continued to rail at Dumbledore. “Someone who can help... right... someone unbiased. That’s bloody likely! How stupid do you think I am? Anyone you’d send my way would be about the bloody Order, and duty, and stiff upper lips, and all that rot! No thank you!”

Lupin grabbed Harry’s wrist with unexpected strength. “Harry, I said that’s enough!”

“Let go of me!” Harry shouted. “Who do you think you are – my father? You’re not even my godfather!” Before the words were out of his mouth, he felt a catch in his throat and a heaviness pressing down upon him.

Lupin was clearly stung but shot back, “You’re right, I’m not. I’m just one of the large number of people working more or less full-time to keep you alive, and Merlin knows, you don’t make it easy. When you’re ready to keep a civil tongue – and I might settle for having you act like a human being – then I’ll let go of you.”

"I told you to let go of me," Harry said in a quiet and dangerous way. Lupin released Harry, with anger or frustration or something like that in his eyes.

Harry returned his full attention to Dumbledore. "I knew I was going to be watched tonight; Tonks was clear about that. If you want to watch from the shadows, that's fine. If I so much as see anyone other than Tonks or Bill, I'll hex them with everything I have."

Dumbledore stood silently and watched Harry seethe for the better part of a minute, before he spoke. "May I ask you, Harry... would you treat Sirius this way, were he here?"

Harry's voice shook. "If he were... if he were here, everything would be different."

Dumbledore pressed him, "If Sirius were standing before you, would you shout at him for trying to protect you?"

Harry looked down and said sullenly, "No."

"Did Remus merit the pain that you just caused him?" asked Dumbledore

"No," Harry said, though the admission irritated him.

Dumbledore paused, until Harry met his eyes. "Do you need help?" he asked.

"I need you to teach me how to kill Voldemort," Harry answered.

Dumbledore's face fell. "In my office, after you returned from the Department of Mysteries, it was clear that you were distressed by the idea of killing –"

Harry cut in coldly, " – and then I tore apart half a dozen Death Eaters. Seems a bit late for worries."

"There is a darkness falling about you, Harry," Dumbledore said. "Right now, I do not know how to lead you back into the light."

"I don't trust you, so now I'm dark – is that it?" Harry sneered.

"No, the problem is that you seem to have lost hope," Dumbledore corrected him. "You see the world through a darkened lens, which is the first step into darkness itself."

"The world is dark, so that's what I see," Harry returned. "I'll bet you wish you could get back the old me – the one who worshipped you, because he didn't know any better."

Dumbledore frowned. "I am fallible – I have admitted this to you."

"Fallible, eh? You don't act like it," Harry said. "Are we done?"

"For the moment," Dumbledore sighed, and with a wave of his hand the surroundings returned to sharp relief and the din returned to Harry's ears.

Lupin crossed his arms, and said, "I have an unexpected opportunity to hear Heather perform, and I plan to seize it. Do you have a problem with that?"

"Whatever," Harry said dismissively as he walked away.

Tonks followed him closely. "Harry," she said, "you don't have to be like this."

"Like what?" he snapped without looking her way.

"Like everyone's out to get you," she answered, "because they're not."

Harry looked her square in the eye, shook his head sadly, and said, "You must be joking."

## Chapter Twenty-seven

### IF MUSIC BE THE FOOD OF LOVE

With one turn and three steps, he found himself in the midst of a row between Bill and a brightly flushed Ginny. The fun just doesn't end, does it? he thought.

"A family meeting, about poor little Ginny? Oh, that sounds just cracking!" Ginny set her jaw, levelled her expression, and added, "Mum should be up for it – I'm sure she's been too busy to tread on anyone's dreams lately."

"Ginny! That's uncalled for!" Bill snapped.

"How would you know? As soon as you finished Hogwarts, you left," Ginny hissed.

Bill looked ready to explode; it was very different than the controlled fury Harry remembered from the row at the Grangers' house. "You'd be surprised what I know," he seethed. "Unlike you, I remember Uncle Fabian and Uncle Gideon. I'll tell you what I know, Ginny – I know that the name Prewett isn't something to be used for your silly games!"

Ginny's voice was painfully shrill. "You're not Dad – stop acting like it!" She briskly brushed past Bill and joined the musicians, huddling next to Heather.

Tonks clamped her hand on Harry's shoulder. "Aw," she said, "Ginny's taking after ickle Harrykins. Isn't that grand?" Harry let out a low growl.

She moved to Bill. "Don't be cross with Ginny. Heather set this up specifically."

"You make Ginny sound like the shrinking violet here," Bill said. "She's hardly that! She's... I don't know what she is anymore. I don't like my baby sister shading the truth, and I don't like that damn violin – not a bit! And the name... if Mum had been here tonight, she

would've either exploded or fainted dead away!" The loud ruffle of a cloak interrupted him.

Snape's voice dripped with false sincerity. "My goodness, Mister Weasley. Your sister possesses a formidable talent – very formidable, indeed." He summoned a crooked and vaguely frightening smile. "I take it that she is playing the Black Stradivarius?"

Harry noticed that Tonks shrunk back slightly. "I thought you were leaving," he growled at Snape.

Before Snape could respond, Bill stepped in the way. "Stay out of our family affairs, Snape," he said coldly.

"You may wish to offer me an invitation, though I reserve the right to decline," Snape sneered. "Tell me... are the initials 'N.P.' carved into the finish? As I remember it, they were found somewhere on the back side." Harry froze.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Bill snarled.

"Ah, another whiff of your family's infamous temper. I certainly don't see enough of that," Snape said. "Tell your parents, Weasley. Tell them, or I may be forced to suffer through a conversation with your father. Despite what you or others may think, I do harbour concern for my students' personal safety." He turned to Tonks. "I shall remain for a time. This little outing of yours may yet become a spectacle."

"Whatever you like, Severus," Tonks said with a wave of her hand.

Snape pulled two wads from the folds of his cloak that looked like crumpled Extendable Ears. "I will give your brothers their due, Weasley," he said. "At least they prove useful, from time to time." He pushed the wads tightly into his ears and stalked off.

"What was that git going on about?" Bill grumbled. "How would I know if there were any initials carved in the damn thing? She won't let me within ten feet of it!"

"He's right," Harry said. "I saw them."

Bill paled, and spluttered, “He... he can’t know anything about this! I will not be beholden to Snape!”

“‘N.P.’ is written on it? How intriguing... it is old enough, after all...” Luna said in a ghostly voice.

Tonks raised an eyebrow. “What are you going on about? Well? Spit it out, then – no quibbling!” She chuckled. “Get it? No quibbling?” She reached out and playfully slapped Luna on the shoulder. For her part, Luna just continued to stare vacantly.

Tonks harrumphed, “Come on! I’ve been waiting to use that! Not a laugh, not a snort – not even a grin?”

Bill groaned at Tonks. He asked Luna, “What are you thinking? If you can tell me anything useful...?”

“I have a trivia question for you,” Luna declared.

Bill squinted at her. “A what?”

“A trivia question,” Luna repeated. “My dad prints trivia questions in the Quibbler, you know. We love trivia, the both of us. A few weeks ago, he asked me to name five of our kind who are or were renowned for playing the violin.”

“Renowned... you mean, um, known in broader circles?” Bill asked.

Luna nodded. “Aptly put,” she said.

Bill hesitated, and then shook his head. “I didn’t know there were five. I suppose that fiddler for The Weird Sisters wouldn’t count... uh... what’s his name...?”

Tonks frowned. “Merton Graves plays the cello, for goodness’ sake – the cello.”



Bill laughed. "Should have known you'd have that on the tip of your tongue, Tonks. Fine then; let me think on it... er... Miroslav Kryzkowski?"

Luna brightened. "You have one of five. Only a few readers thought of Kryzkowski."

"Perlmutter... can't remember his first name off the top," Bill added.

"Last names are acceptable. You have two of five," Luna said.

Bill scratched his head. "Well... there's Paganini, of course, but you can't really count him. I mean, most think he was some kind of demon – " He stopped, and his eyebrows shot up.

Luna nodded enthusiastically. "Niccolo Paganini... 'N.P.' I'm impressed that you've named three of five; our readers averaged two – "

"I knew it!" Bill shrieked. "I knew it was cursed! That tears it... mmpffh!"

Tonks smiled a false smile, and clapped her hand firmly over Bill's mouth. "I think we're going to have to cut you off, luv... how many pints have you had, anyway?" she said loudly and gaily, then added in an insistent mutter, "Ixnay on the urse-kay!" Bill cowed his head.

Luna chattered on as though nothing had been said. "Did you know that Paganini collected Stradivari's instruments? He had several violins, a viola and a cello at various times. Some think that the Guarneri was actually his favourite – they call it 'il Cannone' – but according to ..."

Harry said, "I think Bill's heard enough, don't you?"

"But Paganini's history is fascinating," Luna insisted. "The idea that he was a dark creature is rubbish. Can you imagine falling for such a...?" She seemed at last to take notice of Bill's colour, blinked suddenly – Harry wouldn't have noticed, except that Luna rarely blinked – and stopped.

Bill clenched his jaw. "I intend to take that violin, permanently seal it in its case, and take it as far away as possible." Tonks looked Bill in the eyes. He tried to shirk her gaze, but couldn't. Harry tried not to smile – it was obvious even to him that Bill was done for.

"Has it hurt her?" Tonks asked.

"She's bloody well obsessed with it – does that count?" Bill retorted.

Tonks groaned. "Has she hurt anyone else with it?" she asked.

"No, of course not," he snapped.

Her voice turned soft. "Have you felt anything in its presence?" she asked him.

"Other than irritation?" he quipped.

"You know what I mean," she said firmly.

Bill scowled. He huffed. He squirmed. At length, he said, "No," as though he were uttering an Unforgivable curse.

Tonks flashed a smile of victory. "Then there's nothing to concern yourself with tonight. I want to dance with you, and that requires music for dancing." She looked askance at some of the revellers, and let her eyes take in the low expanse of the vault. "I'd say that the only thing we're likely to hear in this club is music to break kneecaps by."

Bill feigned horror. "Why, Miss Tonks, are you saying that you're too old for this sort of thing?"

Tonks crossed her arms. "Certainly not. What about you?"

"Er... right, then," Bill said. "I'll try to find out what else they're planning to play. I will not start a row with Ginny... don't you waggle your finger at me... but I'm not letting this alone. First thing tomorrow, do you hear?"

Tonks rolled her eyes. “Yes, dad!” she teased. Bill threw up his hands, and stiffly strode toward Heather.

She turned on Harry, who managed to say, “Erm... that was interesting.”

“I am impressed by your management skills,” Luna said. “Perhaps you can offer lessons?”

Tonks worried her lower lip. “I went too far, didn’t I? I’m forever doing that.”

“Did you know that Professor Flitwick could easily have been an answer to the trivia question, if he had wished it?” Luna said.

Tonks cocked her head and stared at Luna. “I’m sorry... what?”

Harry chuckled. “This one doesn’t travel in straight lines, Tonks,” he advised.

Luna smiled. “Thank you, Harry. You’re filled with compliments this evening,” she said. She turned her attention back to Tonks. “I was just saying that Professor Flitwick could have been an answer to the trivia question, if he had wished it. He is a gifted musician. He has a cabinet in his office where he keeps a very rare violin – a Villiers, I believe he told me – and a guitar and several different types of woodwinds. I imagine that he knows quite a lot about Paganini, quite a lot indeed.”

Tonks beamed. “That’s brilliant!” she exclaimed. “I mean, it’s natural to think of Defence professors first when curses are a possibility, but Flitwick would be the perfect person to ask for help!”

Harry had thought of Flitwick as well, back on the beach when Heather heard Ginny play for the first time. He understood what Luna was driving at, though – Flitwick would be ideal because he was a musician as well as a charms expert. Something else tickled at the back of his mind.

“Luna... I’ve been in Professor Flitwick’s office several times, and he hasn’t opened any cabinets for me,” Harry observed.

“I assist the Professor from time to time. On occasion, I review first-years’ papers and projects. For the most part, I handle correspondence and such,” she said.

Thoughts of missing property and misleading study hints pushed into Harry’s mind. “Then why doesn’t he do anything about your housemates?” he demanded.

“I’ve never asked him to do anything,” Luna said calmly.

“Why should he wait to be asked? He’s your Head of House, for goodness’ sake!” Harry snapped.

“Your reaction marks you as a Gryffindor,” Luna said. “Professor Flitwick would do absolutely anything to help anyone if asked.” Though her voice never faltered or rose, Harry felt her emphasis on ‘if asked’.

“And if not asked...?” Harry began.

“Then he would assume a person’s competence to deal with the situation at hand as she or he saw fit,” Luna finished.

Tonks’ brow furrowed. “What’s the problem with your housemates, exactly?” she asked Luna.

Luna sighed. “It would take some time to answer your question in the proper context.”

“I’m a patient woman when I need to be,” Tonks said. “Harry, make yourself useful. Go talk to Ron, and make Bill happy. If Bill’s happy, then it’s more likely that I’ll be happy. If I’m happy, then you’re more likely to survive your dance lessons.” She smiled wickedly and ushered Luna off. Harry realised that he was beaten, just as surely as Bill before him, and he unwillingly trundled toward the bar.

Ron caught Harry's eye and cautiously watched him approach. He said nothing until Harry was within arm's reach. "So... you had a nice ride, then?" he asked.

"Sure, a nice ride," Harry said. He stopped, but just couldn't let it go at that. "Luna is good company," he added. "We walked all over the city. It was brilliant."

Ron frowned. "She's still recovering! What were you thinking, walking her all over the place?"

"What do you care?" Harry snapped. "I thought you were on a date."

"Hah," Ron snorted, "that was put to rest in about five minutes. She spent the whole bloody ride talking about music, thinking about music, and scheming to play music. She and Ginny were on and on and on and on... cripes, it's all that either of them could talk about! I mean, going on the whole time about one thing – and not an especially interesting thing at that – can you imagine?"

Harry said, "I can imagine," and began to hum the Chudley Cannons' fight song.

Ron's ears reddened. "I do not... that's unfair; it's not like I... it's not the same – not at all!" he spluttered. Harry laughed at his distress, which did nothing whatever to relieve it.

One of the tall, lightly clad women at the bar returned her attention to Ron, and then looked Harry up and down. He didn't care for it at all. "So, Ronnie... are you going to stand there, or are you going to make introductions?" she asked.

Harry mouthed 'Ronnie?' and Ron rolled his eyes. "Mary, Harry. Harry, Mary," he rolled off absently.

She didn't look like a Mary to Harry; he expected something more exotic, or at least more forward. 'Mary' wears a buttoned jumper, he thought, not whatever that is. He managed a smile, and said, "Charmed."

She extended her hand. He wasn't about to kiss it, and she left it in an awkward position for a handshake; somehow he managed to grasp and wiggle it about in a not-entirely-uncomfortable fashion. She prattled on about a hundred things that were meaningless or unimportant to him. 'Charmed', indeed, he thought; why couldn't it be a silencing charm? He tried looking at her in hopes that it would change his mood; there was, after all, quite a lot of her to look at. It didn't work. Instead, he became acutely aware that there were a number of girls he'd rather see in a balaclava and heavy woollens than the one before him in gauzy bits of whatever.

Harry had to get away. "Ron, look... I'm really sorry... but..." he managed.

Ron sighed. "I'm sorry as well, mate. We keep letting the birds get in the way this summer, eh?"

"In the way?" Mary huffed.

Ron smiled at her indulgently. "Oh, no - not you, luv," he said in a silky voice that was almost entirely unlike his own. "Harry's my best mate and we have a few things to settle, that's all."

She pressed close to Ron and nuzzled his cheek. Harry thought that the top of Ron's head was going to shoot violently into the air. "You'd better hurry, then," she said to Ron in a voice calculated to make his toes curl. "Make your peace, hand him off to Julia, and come back to me. After all, I'm sure you'd much rather -" She leant in even closer, whispered something into his ear, and then backed away with a carnivorous grin.

Ron's eyes flickered. "Well... well," he said, "I... that sounds very interesting, but hardly a first-night-out sort of... er, tell me... is that actually possible?" He didn't blush as much as Harry would have expected.

"You're cute," she said. "I like that... quite a lot." She blew Ron a kiss, winked at Harry, then turned and began to walk away; even Harry found himself momentarily taken in by the sight. "You'll never know if it's possible, unless you hurry along," she purred without looking back.

Ron moved to one side, putting Mary behind him and Harry before him. He whispered too forcefully, "She's eighteen – can you believe it? I was asking around. The one with the darker hair – Julia – she's watching you, isn't she? Don't stare, for Merlin's sake!"

"Ron..." Harry began.

"She wants to put the make on you – can't you tell?" Ron said eagerly. "This could still end up one hell of a night!"

Harry struggled to make sense of Ron. "Have you been drinking?" he asked.

"Only one... or three... I don't know. Seems like pretty weak stuff, though," Ron said. "Look... I mean, don't look, but look... live a little, mate... you know, while you can. If you don't get yourself snogged soon, you're going to burst into little bitty itty bits that just... explode all over the room – BOOM, splat!" He nervously brushed back his bangs. "It's just bloody snogging, you know..." The leggy, lightly dressed girls waiting at the end of the bar sniggered at that. "...no rings or ministers involved. 'Course, it could be more than a snog, but that's up to you, I expect."

"Ron..." Harry warned. He wished that Ron would lower his voice.

"I'm serious!" Ron said.

Harry couldn't help but snigger himself. Yeah... you're Sirius, all right, he thought.

"What?" Ron demanded.

"Never mind," Harry said. How do I put this? he agonised. "I... um... appreciate... what you're trying to do. It's passing strange, considering how the day has gone... but I do appreciate it. It's just not... it's not..."

"What? They don't do it for you? You must be joking!" Ron said, exasperated.

Harry harrumphed. "Ron, this is Harry here – you know, Harry? Best mate for five years, and all that? Can you see me losing myself with someone I don't know? Gods, I couldn't take that kind of risk even if I wanted to!"

Ron gaped at him for a while. He seemed strangely deflated, but after a long while he slowly nodded. "I don't know what I was... I'm sorry again, I suppose. I just..." He steeled himself, and said quietly and firmly, "I'm not going out without having a damn good time first. You shouldn't either. Life's too short. Merlin knows, it's too... it's too short... it's just so short, you know..." He bit his lip, and looked at the floor.

Harry fidgeted. He said quietly, "Madam Bones said... and Lupin, he said... there are people, you know, who can help you deal with this sort of –"

Ron glared at him. "Off the top, I can think of two people who have to live knowing how they're going to die. Funny, both of them are standing right here," he growled. He took a deep breath, and his voice softened. "Besides... if I talk to any of that lot, then it's a one-way ticket to Lockhart's old bed at St. Mungo's."

Harry couldn't deny that. He struggled for something else, some way to make Ron understand without snapping or criticising or blaming. "Maybe... maybe you need to find someone who wants to be with you and doesn't care what might come next," Harry offered.

"That's what I'm trying to do," Ron huffed.

"I mean, someone who understands the, uh, circumstances. Don't you want more than this?" Harry asked, with a dismissive wave toward the bar.

"Well, that's a bloody long list, isn't it?" Ron sneered. "Let's think... someone who dropped me cold; a known nutter; and Lavender Brown. Two real choices, and I'd have to be barmy for one of them!"



Harry winced. "Don't call Luna a nutter... and keep it down, would you? You're making a scene."

"I am not," Ron said petulantly.

"A bit more of this, and people will think I'm the one to do... well, whatever Myrtle over there wants to do to you," Harry quipped.

Ron covered his mouth. "You... did you say Myrtle...?" Ron chuckled. "I suppose... I suppose that there might be moaning involved..." He clapped his hand over his mouth again and just shook, until he managed to spit out, "...and trust me, you'll never be doing that to anyone. Gods, what an image!" He laughed loudly. "Get me an Obliviator, quickly! Oh, that hurts!"

"Shut it – now – or we'll really need one," Harry forced out while maintaining an even smile.

Ron fixed Harry with a glassy-eyed stare for a moment, and then nodded; Harry hoped that he was snapping out of whatever state he was in.

Harry glanced around casually, to see if anyone was paying attention. No one was staring at them, but someone was staring pointedly at Heather. He looked to Ron, flicked his head ever so slightly to one side, and used his eyes to guide Ron's attention. Ron raised an eyebrow slightly, and stood up straighter. Harry knew that they shared the same observation and concern. There was nothing magical about the exchange, but it was something reserved to the closest of friends.

The woman was not old, but might not have been all that young – it was very hard to tell. She had short dark hair that clung to her head, intense eyes, and a sleek figure held in a ready posture. She knows how to fight, Harry thought. She wore a dark leather duster over closely fitted dark clothing. Her look wasn't all that different from some in the crowd, but she stuck out to Harry like a wizard roaming the High Street.

"What's she holding?" Ron whispered?

"I think it's a mobile telephone," Harry said. "My uncle carries one from time to time, but it's quite a bit larger."

"Where does the wire go, then?" Ron asked. "Fellytones hook to the wall with a wire – even I know that."

"I said it's mobile," Harry groaned. "It travels with you – no wires. It's... it's sort of a two-way wireless, I suppose."

"Ah," said Ron. "You may be right. She's jabbing on the number thingies and putting it to her face."

"Ears?" Harry asked.

Ron fished in his pockets. Luna came up beside Harry and stood closer than was customary; it didn't bother him. She looked him in the eyes, and turned to follow his gaze.

"She's one of us, of course," Luna said matter-of-factly. "I thought I might be of some help – you know, just in case."

Ron smiled slightly. "Er, how can you tell?"

"When she moves, her clothing doesn't move," she said.

Ron's brow furrowed. "I don't get it."

"Observe," Luna said. She lifted her own arm to her face. The sleeve of her shirt pulled taut, and the way it draped across her body subtly changed. She lowered her arm, and nodded at the mysterious woman. As the woman talked on the mobile phone, she moved her arm. Neither the duster nor her clothing changed position – not a shift, not a wrinkle. Luna grinned, and added, "Not the sort of thing you might find in an ordinary shopping district."

"I'll be switched," Ron whispered.

"Either her clothing is charmed, or made of a certain very special hide, or both," Luna sing-songed. "A large coat made of that hide would be

terribly expensive, I should think. I'd much prefer a Demiguise coat, although I suppose that it would be quite easy to lose. Of course, I'd want the Demiguise to be done with its pelt first. I abhor hunting... do you abhor hunting, Ronald...?"

Ron gaped at her, and Harry smiled. "Good eye, Luna," he said. "You might want to fetch Tonks. Ron and I are going to have a listen."

"Yeah... fetch Tonks, would you?" Ron said quietly. "Here, Harry... take one." He shoved an Extendable Ear into Harry's hand.

Harry smoothly made his way to one side of the woman, and Ron sidled up opposite him. Soon, they could clearly hear her.

"...no, she hasn't sung anything... Julian, I will not... look, I owe you, but I certainly don't owe you... Julian... this is ridiculous. Burke is going to pop a seam when he finds..." The woman scowled, and held the mobile phone away from her ear a few inches. Despite that, Harry noticed that her eyes followed a very disciplined pattern back and forth across the stage area. "Here's the situation," she snapped. "I will watch her. I will let you know if she sings – on the stage, in the loo, whatever. I can detain her for a short time, if necessary... I most certainly will not do that to her. There are very explicit guidelines where she is concerned... frankly, it's none of your affair... no... no, it's not. I suggest you keep your pointy beak in the clear; you might not like what you find. Wha... if you weren't so intent on screwing Burke, not to mention... oh, that's too much information; I really don't want to... uh-huh... right... well... then that's your cross to bear, isn't it...? No. No, I will not. I have explicit... once more, stay clear of it. Mr. MacLeish's instructions aren't yours to question, unless you care very little for your employment... Julian, if you poke beneath that rock, then you must care very little for your health. Wha... no... well, I wouldn't exactly wait around to cash your bonus cheque, then... well... that would be your problem; no worries for me. Why...? He trusts me... he trusts me, and I'm not about to cock that up. I'm on the rotation to supervise Nicola, for Chrissake... WHAT... what did you say? You insufferable... why? Why? Of all the... because I owe you, you wanker, and when this is done, I won't owe you. If you ever assert that I owe you anything – ever – again, there won't be enough left of you to feed a herring. Get your scrawny arse in here now, so I

can be done with you. Five minutes, and I walk. Set me off, and you know that I'll be dialling Burke straight away." She angrily stabbed at one of the buttons on the phone, and thrust it deep into one of the duster's pockets.

Harry reeled in the Ear and nonchalantly moved on. Ron waited a moment and then followed. It would have been discreet, except that the gaggle of girls was trying to remain within earshot. The woman glanced at the brazen girls for an instant and a flicker of disgust played across her face. Ten points to your house, whomever you are, Harry thought.

"What did you make of that?" Ron muttered.

"Julian is Heather's minder, more or less. Burke has something to do with her as well – he manages the money, I think. It sounds to me like those two may be having a falling-out. Did you get the impression that this Julian is trying to catch Heather singing? I can't figure why," Harry said.

"She said she could 'detain' Heather. I've heard enough," Ron said menacingly, his head inclining slightly toward the woman. "What do you think – give her a chance to explain herself, or just come out swinging?"

"You won't be doing anything; it's not worth risking a letter from the Ministry. She doesn't want to be here, and she's just watching for now. I know what this Julian character looks like, and I can certainly handle him," Harry said. "Let's just point her out to Tonks, and watch for... Ron, what are you...? Ron!"

Ron walked slowly past the woman; he never stopped. Harry clearly heard him, though. "Don't even think about doing anything to Heather," he said. "There are Aurors watching you."

"I've only seen the one that the girl with the large eyes is bringing toward us. You're not one, and I think that the same is true for your dark-haired friend," the woman said quietly and evenly. "Keep her from singing on stage, and nothing will happen." She never made a move toward Ron or toward a wand.

Harry had the sense that Ron had just set something in motion that would have been better kept still. He took a deep breath, and decided to intervene. He slowly sidled up beside her, and faced the stage. "You're not from England... Australia, maybe?" Harry said.

"I'm a bit old for you," she said. "Is there a reason you're taking up my time?"

"You don't have any idea who I am, do you?" he said.

"No, and I can't imagine that it matters," she said. "Come back when you're grown up; perhaps we'll have something to talk about then."

"Heather's very important to me," he said. "It might be best if you just walked away."

She turned to look at him, clearly annoyed. "Stay clear of this, boy," she warned.

Harry waved his wand inside his sleeve, and cancelled the glamour. He deliberately tossed back his fringe, which left his scar in stark relief. The woman's expression never wavered but she said slowly, "Well... that adds an interesting wrinkle to the situation."

"You don't want to make me angry," he said in a low voice.

"No, not if I value my job," she said. "Mr. MacLeish would have my head on a platter if I laid a finger on you. So... what's next?"

"Why does Julian want to catch Heather singing?" he asked.

She smiled slightly, apparently impressed. "You're fully informed, aren't you? Very well... he's trying to trigger penalties in her contract."

She seemed to assume that he knew more than he did, probably because he had used Julian's first name. He decided to exploit that. "Burke wouldn't agree with this?" he asked.

“Certainly not, and he would be right to disagree. Julian’s an arse and a poor strategist. Burke would like to have a position next summer. Julian seems to think that his best chance for that lies in blackmail,” she said.

Harry reacted instinctively. “I don’t care for the sound of that,” he said. “Call Burke, straight away.”

“No,” she said.

“What do you mean, ‘no’?” he snarled.

The woman crossed her arms, and leaned more heavily back against the edge of the bar. “Call him yourself. I’ll just stand here until Julian shows up, and then he’s on his own.”

“I have no way of calling him,” Harry said. “It’s not as though I have a mobile telephone. How do you make it work, anyway? Shouldn’t – you know – shouldn’t there be interference, or something?”

The slight smile returned. “You simply need the right sort of phone. Mr. MacLeish may be able to help you with that. You do have a meeting with him next month, correct?”

“How did you...?” Harry began.

“Nicola has been prattling on non-stop for the last two weeks,” she said. “Here.” She held out the mobile phone. “Press ‘8’ and then ‘Dial’. I have nothing to do with this, of course.”

Harry dialled the phone, and awkwardly held it to his ear. Ron stood back, watching with a raised eyebrow.

A voice grumbled, “Burke Preston here.”

Harry cleared his throat. “Mr. Preston, we haven’t been formally introduced. My name is Harry Potter, and –”

There was a brief fit of coughing on the other end. “What can I do for you, Mr. Potter... and how did you get this number?”

So, you're one of us as well, Harry thought. This just gets stranger. "I'm borrowing a mobile at the moment," he said; the woman frowned. "I wanted to let you know that your friend Julian seems intent on stirring up trouble tonight. I'm at a club in Edinburgh, called Cabaret Molière –"

"I know the place," Preston said quickly.

"Heather Magruder is here," Harry said. "So are her band mates, and Julian will be here presently."

There was silence for a few moments. "I see," Preston finally said. "How is it that you know Heather, may I ask?"

"I'm Mr. MacLeish's neighbour," Harry admitted. "We've met before, on the beach. Erm... I wasn't exactly hospitable."

Preston spluttered, "Well... that's... well, I missed that completely... oh – that's rich! Heather was with you at the time, wasn't she?"

Harry didn't answer him. "I think Julian's out to hurt her. I just thought you should know. I can handle him, of course, but... er... I might be a little..."

"Rough?" Preston asked. "He'd most likely deserve it. Still, Julian is, shall we say, not completely acquainted with our ways – do you understand? It might be best if I handle him instead. I'll be there in... oh... two minutes?"

"Right, then. Er, thank you?" Harry said tentatively.

"It was good of you to call," Preston said. "I'm most grateful." Harry heard a click, then a buzzing sound, and then nothing. He handed the mobile phone back to the woman without a word.

Moments later, as the musicians prepared to take the stage, a familiar looking man with long blond hair sliced through the room. It hadn't fully struck Harry on the beach, but Julian reminded him a bit of Lucius Malfoy. He didn't need to hear a word; he could see the

man tear into Heather from the moment he reached her. Harry was halfway to the stage before he realised that he was in motion. He was nearly within reach of Heather and Julian before he recognised that both Ron and the mysterious woman were just steps behind, with Luna and Tonks close at their heels. The woman was a wild card, and Harry let his wand drop inside his sleeve until he cradled the end in his fingertips.

“You have no respect for your talent, no respect for your management, no respect for the label, and no respect for the opportunities you’ve been handed!” Julian shrieked.

“Handed? Everything I’ve gotten, I’ve earned!” Heather shouted back.

Julian jabbed his finger toward her. “See? There you are – a complete lack of respect for your talent. What are you thinking, screaming like that? You shouldn’t be screaming, you shouldn’t be subjecting your ears to this caterwauling, you shouldn’t be putting in late nights... no respect, none whatever!”

“Isn’t there a new boy waiting for you somewhere, Julian? Someone fresh? Or have you decided to settle down, maybe stick it out for a week at a time?” Heather sneered.

“No respect for your management, and no respect whatever for your contract,” Julian snapped. “Your contract – ”

“Enjoy the ride, Julian – it’s over in ten months,” Heather growled.

Julian allowed a Cheshire grin to spread across his face. “Your contract has so many interesting elements,” he said, “like the behaviour clauses, or the self-renewal triggers. It’s a beautiful document, perfectly designed for you. You’ll be fortunate to be free of it when you’re fifty.”

“I could tie you up in the courts forever,” she said, “and don’t you forget it. Nearly everyone admits the thing is unenforceable.”

“Yes,” he said, “and you’d be prohibited from performing or recording during the whole process. So... go ahead. Sing your brains out. Play



in public with your little friends. Prance around in leather and minis, hang about in clubs, consort with questionable men... live it up." He smiled an entirely false smile, and added sweetly, "We'll own you."

"Hullo, Julian," called a cross-sounding voice from behind Harry. "We really need to reach a firm understanding in regard to roles."

Julian stiffened, and then grumbled, "Fancy seeing you here, Burke." He stared down the mysterious woman, who simply shrugged in return. "I believe it's my responsibility to make sure that Heather understands what she can and cannot do."

He proceeded to light into Heather again, this time with a tangent having to do with the sacking of her former guitarist, but she ignored him. Harry saw her try to make eye contact with Burke, who conspicuously avoided it. Does he know what she can do? Harry wondered.

Heather's eyes flashed malice. "I don't know what to say to you anymore, Julian. I think I've said it all before, but you don't get it. We have a set to play."

Julian crossed his arms. "Go ahead – it's your never-ending contract, not mine."

Burke cleared his throat. "Julian, the next time you allow the word 'contract' to pass between your lips, there may be another sacking involved. Are we clear?"

Julian glared at him. "Clauses were included in the document because she won't listen to reason. I used to catch her busking, even after the second record – out on a freezing street corner, straining her vocal cords!"

Burke ignored him, and looked instead to Heather. "You have reason to be upset, and you may direct it at me. You know full well that I approved your guitarist's dismissal, and not Julian, but it was at Mr. MacLeish's personal request. He had Mr. McCormack in mind for you, and I have found that there is no value in arguing with him when he sets his mind. It's true that we're under pressure regarding recording

and touring costs, but I've convinced the label to forego any force reductions until after the tour when we can evaluate actual revenues and expenditures. If you were working regularly, we would have discussed this. As it stands, you've made yourself rather difficult to reach this month."

Heather exhaled slowly. "Thank you for being straight with me," she said before she returned her attention to Julian. "As for you, I hope you enjoy the set. Maybe I'll howl a little AC/DC, just for you."

"You – wouldn't – dare," Julian hissed. "Burke, put a stop to this!"

"I'll wager she wouldn't be doing this if you hadn't provoked her," Preston said calmly. "Now you get to reap what you've sown."

"Like hell..." Julian began.

Preston smiled, revealing unusually sharp-looking teeth. "Before I forget, I have an introduction to make. Julian Sumner, this is Harry Potter. You might remember Harry, from our walk on the beach."

Julian's brow furrowed, "I don't... oh! You're the neighbour. Er, what are you doing here, may I ask?"

Harry was quite prepared to threaten Julian, but Preston stepped in. "As it turns out, Harry is a friend of Heather's. He's also a business partner of Mr. MacLeish."

Something seemed to slowly register for Julian. He paled slightly, and said, "Business... partner...?"

Harry summoned a wicked grin. "Yes – business partner," he confirmed.

Preston's smile grew even wider. "Unless you have a strong desire to manage church choirs in the Philippines, I suggest that you calm yourself and refrain from baiting Heather for the remainder of the evening." Julian spluttered, but said nothing. Harry mouthed 'Thank you', and Preston nodded.

Heather whispered in Harry's ear before she moved to the stage, "I don't know how you did it, but thank you. Listen – I have something for you." She fished in her pocket, but McCormack tugged at her arm. She mouthed 'later' and let herself be drawn to the stage. Once there, she slipped on a headset with a microphone attached. There was a loud wail of feedback, that was mercifully replaced by her voice.

"Er... hello out there. In case you don't know, I'm Heather Magruder," she said, provoking a healthy round of applause. "My mates had a few sets planned for you tonight, and I'm joining in. No opera or anything like that, I promise you – although we might toss in a ballad or two." The crowd hooted its approval. Harry tried to manoeuvre toward the centre of the stage, but it was becoming difficult; he wondered if they'd let in the entire queue.

She smiled. "My mates tend to like the old noisy stuff, and this is their gig. If you don't like it, then plug your ears or move on!" She nodded to the drummer, who rhythmically clapped his sticks together four times before the band erupted.

Harry recognised some of the music – a Jimi Hendrix song here, Rolling Stones there. McCormack and the keyboardist did most of the singing, and Heather seemed content to take her frustrations out on her guitar. Harry settled in at the centre of the stage; the rush of the crowd pressed him against the edge of the riser from time to time, but he was where he wanted to be.

She sang one strange song that Harry thought was about Alice and the looking glass. The lyrics mentioned Alice at any rate; and the Mad Hatter and the Red Queen and dormice; and a hookah-smoking caterpillar for that matter. Harry had no idea what a hookah was, but something about the song made him conclude that it was probably a bad thing. Julian stood frozen at the side of the stage. When he looked as if he might rush up onto the stage, the woman with the mobile phone was there to stop him. When he looked as if he might prefer to leave, Burke Preston cut him off. Harry found a certain satisfaction in the man's distress.

At the end of the strange song, Heather handed her guitar to the backup singer and slowly walked to the middle of the stage, directly in

front of Harry. She nodded at someone unseen, and the lights dimmed until only Heather and the keyboard player were lit in a foggy glow.

She slipped into Shona's cadence for a moment. "Some of yeh asked fer this one. Some of yeh know it. If yeh don't, then it's not fer yeh." Harry heard Julian whimper, "Don't do it!"

There was barely any music at all, just a few quiet chords that echoed behind her voice. This was at last the voice that Harry associated with Heather. He didn't understand the words, and quickly realized that they weren't English words at all. They were heavy and guttural, and Harry thought that they would sound rather like an auto accident coming from anyone else's mouth. As soon as she began, a few people whooped in apparent recognition – otherwise, the room went silent.

When she was finished, about half the crowd erupted into wild applause, and many of the rest clapped tepidly. He looked about and spotted a few people who looked rather like Wimbourne fans singled out amidst the Puddlemere United side at a league match – uncomfortable and angry, but too cowed by the opposition to say anything.

The rather large man to Harry's left had hooted and clapped madly. He turned a grin on Harry, nudged him with his elbow, and bellowed, "Ain't she somethin'?"

Harry nodded enthusiastically. "She is," he said. "I wish I understood the words."

"Shame that yeh don' know yer heritage," the man said. He closed his eyes and recited, "Cuil-lodair, is Briseadh na h-Eaglaise, is briseadh nan tacannan - lamhachas-laidir da thrìan de ar coms; 's e seoltachd tha dhith oirnn. Nuair a theirgeas a'chruaidh air faobhar na speala caith bhuat a' chlach-liomhaidh; chan eil agad ach iarann bog mur eil de chruas nad innleachd na ni sgathadh.

"Is caith bhuat briathran mine oir chan bhuat briathran agad; tha Tuatha De Danann fon talamh, 's nuair a ruigeas tu Tir a' Gheallaidh,

mura bi thu air t'aire coinnichidh Sasannach riut is plion air, a dh'innse dhut gun tug Dia, brathair athar, coir dha anns an fhearann."

"Oh..." Harry said, because he could think of nothing else to say.

The man still sported a mad grin. "It's na' the words, it's the meanin'. She's tellin' Queen Maggie where ta go." Harry recalled Dumbledore's mention of Heather singing in Gaelic to the Queen; it had sounded controversial, and now he had an inkling why that might be the case.

Julian looked ready to be tossed in a kerbside bin. For that matter, Preston appeared positively ruffled. Both he and the mysterious woman nervously watched the crowd.

Heather retrieved her guitar. "I thought we'd throw in something brand spanking new," she said. "We wrote this one on the road, and it's never been heard outside a bus or a hotel room. Kirley's only played it once, so we'll forgive him. What'd'ya think – that sound all right to you wankers?" There was a loud roar. "I'll take that as 'yes'. It doesn't have a name, really. The working title is 'My Manager is a Flaming Pile of Shite'. Hope you like it." Harry was fairly sure that Julian was going to have a stroke on the spot and that his remains would then spontaneously burst into flames, which suited Harry fine.

Heather let her guitar rest loose, and bobbed from side to side while her band mates played a few bars. Then she joined in.

"All I see, it's not for me. What I want, you have not got..."

Her voice was much lower than before, and sounded breathy and forced. Julian gripped the edge of the stage, and moaned, "What – are – you – doing? Stop doing that to your voice!"

"Tried to use the things you sold me, no matter what the cost... tried to go the way you told me, but each time I got lost... the stairs didn't lead me anywhere –"

Her face contorted into a snarl, and her guitar exploded to life. She glared at Julian more intensely with each powerful chord, as she continued to sing.

“I’m takin’ the fire escape, up to the roof... don’t care if it’s not the way you find the truth... time to make this climb, to rise above...”

Abruptly, she let the guitar fall though she continued singing.

“...this room, and all of you... who say I should do like you would... tried to live the life you sold me, no matter what the cost... tried to walk the way you told me, but each time I got lost... the stairs didn’t lead me anywhere...”

The room exploded in power chords and thumping bass and pounding drums.

“I’m takin’ the fire escape, up to the roof... don’t care if it’s not the way you find the truth...and when I get up that high, I don’t know what I’ll find... but I’d rather look at the sky, than wonder why I let you take my time... time to make this climb, to rise above...”

McCormack broke into a solo over Heather’s power chords. Julian looked as if he wanted to bang his head against the stage. Harry was inclined to help with the banging, if the opportunity arose, but he was quite happy watching Heather.

Her intensity took him aback. The song struck a chord deep within him, too. We have more in common than I really knew, he thought. His place in front of the stage left him at an awkward angle, looking up at her. She was no more conscious of her skirt than before, and he was acutely aware of how long and bare her legs were. She caught his eye, and unexpectedly flashed a trace of a smile. He looked deeply into her eyes. I wish I knew what you were thinking right now, he thought, but he wasn’t sure that he would want to share what was on his mind. Her eyes flickered, his head swam, and he felt a sickening tug like falling into a Floo.

He felt a wave of joy – it felt familiar, like he felt when he flew alone high above the Quidditch pitch... there was some anger – a strong

desire to take his guitar off and dash it over Julian's head... there was a kind of sadness and regret, a sense that nothing would ever be the same... there was a powerful feeling of loneliness and a knowledge that no one understood, not really... and there was a strong sense that he could be undone by green eyes if he were to let it happen... and he had to look at those eyes, but he couldn't screw up the song, not when he was sticking it to that effin' wanker, not when he could see that Julian wanted to crawl under the stage... anger, dark anger... stay away... stay at bay... not right now...

Harry shook his head, and tried in vain to clear his mind. He could see her before him, and he could see himself as well. Somehow he had performed Legilimency on her, and he was horrified. He needed to get out of her mind but couldn't seem to withdraw. He tried to end it, and something stood in his way. He felt something – it was like an animal growling and pouncing – and he realised that he couldn't withdraw because she wasn't letting him.

Her eyes tore at him and he felt the tug again. His mind flooded with memories... flirting at L'Oiseau Chanteur... running on the beach... hiding Heather from Julian and Burke... telling her about his past, at least as much as he could tell a Muggle... the feel of her hands on his back, comforting him... the sense that they shared things in common, things that he had never shared with anyone else before... Heather sitting on the edge of his bed... the smell of her hair... watching her walk from behind and feeling guilty about it... how she looked in that bloody skirt, standing there in the library – she turned his head, even when she was furious with him... how he had wanted to strangle Ron... he could still see Heather in front of him, on the stage, still playing her guitar... he pushed back as hard as he could, and she grew clearer and his memories grew fainter.

She shook her head clear, returned to the power chords, and began to sing again.

“I'm takin' the fire escape, up to the roof...”

Pushing back didn't work like it should have. Instead of being freed, he was flooded with memories and thoughts that weren't his – being hustled out to stand on a blustery street corner and sing for meagre

coins... having her few toys taken from her because she wasn't good enough, because she didn't bring in enough... moving to Madame Hartmann's cottage... travelling constantly... loneliness, in the midst of a crowded room... excruciating highs and lows... Julian being a bastard, but telling the truth – no one really did care about her, just the voice...

“Don't care if it's not the way you find the truth...”

...always a step ahead the darkness, holding it at bay, holding the Wolf at bay, but sometimes letting it out, enjoying it when she snapped at Julian or Madame Hartmann or anyone else foolish enough to tamper with the Wolf... seeing a motorbike race by, outside of St. Ebb... bantering with a nice, attractive – boy? man? He was right on that cusp, but who was he?... sneaking onto the Black's property and sitting on the beach... those green eyes, the ones that were hard to avoid... friends were harder to come by than lovers, though...

“And when I get up that high, I don't know what I'll find...”

... wondering how the Wolf can be real – it can't be real... betrayal – just when she was beginning to feel something special with Shona, the world turned upside down again – lies – who was this man, this Lupin? – fear – how can I be one of them? – sorrow – nothing ever works out in the end... loneliness, crushing loneliness... Ron reaches out to her, decent and kind and helpful in the moment; at least he doesn't like her for the voice – that's refreshing...

“But I'd rather look at the sky, than wonder why I let you take my time...”

...he felt like he was shoved backward. She had a snarl on her face as she sang, and the torrent subsided for a moment before his own memories began to flow out of him... a scream and a green flash... a flying motorbike in the night... a cupboard with locks... hand-me-down clothes... his first ride on the Hogwarts Express, and the first boat ride to the castle... Fluffy, and McGonagall's giant chess game... Voldemort, in the back of Quirrell's head... Ginny and Riddle's diary and the basilisk and Hermione in the Hospital Wing...



Sirius and Lupin and Ron and Hermione in the Shrieking Shack... his patronus, and Sirius racing off on Buckbeak... dodging the Hungarian Horntail... Cedric – poor Cedric... the ghostly shades of his parents emerging from the wand... Umbridge and the blood quill... Voldemort, always in his mind – scar burning, and burning, and burning... becoming the snake... is this madness?... have to save Sirius... it's a trap... Bellatrix... the veil... running, always running... Fliptrask's office... riding the Bonnie to the Burrow... the safeguarding charm... Sirius in a cheap suit... Hermione in a bathrobe... dinner at the Grangers'... the Death Eater attack... he's going to kill her – have to stop Wormtail... noise, light, heat, swinging, flailing, blood... nightmares... dismissal... poor Luna...

Stop! Stop! he screamed, but there was no one to hear it. Somewhere deep inside his mind, it dawned on him that she wouldn't have any idea how to withdraw, that perhaps she was accidentally pulling him back in...

...she knew that the Wolf was real, not just a shade in her mind – the Wolf was in her mind and in her soul – the Wolf was real, and there was nowhere to run anymore – she couldn't bear it, but she knew that she would... she wouldn't be broken, not by Auntie Fiona, not by Julian or Keith MacLeish, and certainly not by the Wolf, and anyone in the way could just sod off... wanting to take that damn picture off his wall and smash it to bits... wanting to kiss and be kissed... wanting... needing... help...

He screamed inside his head again, but it wasn't a scream for release. It was pain, his pain and her pain. He needed to hold her, to help her bear it. She had a vacant half-mad look in her eyes, as if she was pushing through a wall of exhaustion in order to finish the song. He couldn't move. He wondered just how much she'd actually taken in, and how much of it made any sense to her. He wondered what would happen if he kissed her. He wondered if she knew what he was thinking in that instant. Her voice sounded strained and tired.

"Time to make this climb, to rise above... time to make this climb, to rise above."

The song ended on a single powerful note, at the exact moment that the last word died. She breathed hard, her chest rising and falling heavily, and he wanted to feel guilty because he was watching her chest, but he couldn't summon any guilt. Wanting... wanting... he could understand that. He could understand all of it, really – the monster inside, barely contained, barely held at bay – the betrayal, the lies, and the fear; the loneliness, and the wanting.

Her guitar clattered to the stage and she stood there, eyes locked with Harry. The drums began to pound, and some kind of music began to play – Harry didn't know what it was, and he didn't much care. She absently slipped off the headset, her eyes never moving away from his, and stepped toward the edge of the stage. Harry had the presence of mind to step forward and stop her from simply walking off the edge. He reached up, placed his hands at her waist, and lowered her to the floor.

“What... I... was that...?” she babbled.

“Uh-huh,” he said.

Her hands shook. “I... I'm so ashamed, I... you saw everything that...?”

He said faintly, “Uh-huh. Did you?”

She nodded, and asked in a throaty whisper, “How do you... how do you go on?”

“No choice, really,” he said. “Anyone gets in the way, I tell them to sod off.”

She smiled but it quickly faded. Her eyes were haunted, he thought. She placed her hand to his cheek. “I want... I want...”

“Uh-huh,” he said. He realised that he was breathing as hard as she was. He was nearly dizzy from the warmth of the room. He knew that they were still connected somehow. He didn't understand why or how, and he didn't care.

She brought her hand around the side of his head, buried her fingers in his hair, and pulled him to her. The kiss was electric; he was sure that his hair was standing on end, and that his feet had been reduced to cinders. Ron had it right – BOOM, splat! He thought he had known magic before, and now knew that he hadn't – this was magic. She loosened her grip on his hair, and pulled back just enough to look into his eyes. He felt himself pulling and being pulled all at the same time. It was all feelings without thoughts this time, bounding and rebounding from her to him to her to him... wanting... longing... hunger... white-hot... sweating... burning...

He drew her to him with one arm behind her back, his other hand roaming freely, and they began to devour one another. He was dimly aware that her clothing fit like a second skin, and that he desperately needed to feel the skin beneath – and he frantically pushed back with everything he had. Dementors... Snape in a dress... dancing with Ron... he summoned everything and anything to help with the push, but it was so hard. He was a human Patronus, impervious to all things unhappy and disturbing. Why did I ever want to be alone? he wondered. I was a stupid arse! They stood there and embraced and kissed for ten minutes, or a day, or a hundred years – there was no measuring and no knowing, only feeling.

A voice intruded. "Potter!"

Snape in a dress, he thought, reciting naked in McGonagall's class – wait, that one's not mine... that's Hermione's...

Hermione! In a trice, the hunger and the longing subsided just enough for him to push back. Now, it was just a kiss – a terribly pleasant kiss to be sure, but only that.

"Snap out of it, boy!"

Harry broke off the kiss and shrieked, "Gah! Snape in a dress!"

"WHAT?" Snape thundered.

Harry stammered, "I mean... Snape... uh, you see, I was just trying to, um, find a way to push back, and... uh..."

“Push back? Push back against what? Potter, what have you done?”  
Snape demanded.

“Do what?” Harry snapped. “What are you talking about?”

Heather looked past Harry, and said “Oh – my – God...” There was no music anymore. Harry spun around and surveyed the room. Most of the people in the room were in various stages of snogging.

“What the... how...?” Harry managed.

Heather swallowed hard. “We did this?”

“You must be responsible for this, Potter,” Snape said with disdain. “You should establish a dedicated fund at the Ministry, to cover the Obliviation costs associated with your pathetic lack of control.”

Heather whispered. “I couldn’t stop it...”

Harry felt a protective pang pull at him. He reached out to her, and she let herself be held. “We both wanted it,” he said.

“Did we?” she asked.

Snape arched an eyebrow. “Explain, Potter – now.”

“She’s a Legilimens,” Harry snapped. “Don’t tell me you hadn’t figured that out?”

Snape arched an eyebrow. “She is a Squib who may possess some latent abilities in that area – nothing more. You managed this disaster entirely on your own; it has ‘Potter’ written all over it.” He withdrew his wand. “I’m happy to demonstrate.” Harry let go of Heather and lifted his hands defensively.

Snape whispered, “Legilimens,” but Harry felt nothing.

Heather squeezed her eyes shut, and her hands twitched. “No... no... please...”

“Stop it! You’re hurting her!” Harry shouted.

Snape showed signs of strain. “I am not hurting her, Potter,” he gasped. “She is... not defending... she is... resisting her own defence against me... I can not imagine... why...” Heather’s eyes snapped open, dark and fierce. Snape screamed and dropped his wand.

“I’m sorry... I’m sorry... I’m so sorry,” Heather said quickly, with the voice of a scared child.

Snape nursed his wand hand. There were four jagged tears across the palm, and blood dripped down Snape’s wrist and onto the sleeve of his robe. “You have nothing to be sorry about,” Snape told her. “Potter, that was Occlumency.”

Heather’s voice shook. “Did you... did you see it?”

“I did,” Snape said. “Have you seen that manifestation previously?” When she paled, he added, “I take that as affirmative.”

“You didn’t have to do that,” Harry snapped. “She’s a wild talent – Dumbledore said so himself.”

“Perhaps if you had shared that, I might have been spared injury,” Snape sneered.

“Hello... sir...” Heather mumbled.

“Good evening, Miss Magruder,” said Dumbledore. “This is quite a sight, is it not?” He turned to Snape. “May I tend to your hand, Severus? Quickly, please – we must make haste.”

Snape scowled but presented his hand. Dumbledore didn’t bother to take out his wand; he grasped Snape’s hand as though he were about to shake it, and muttered something. The rough tears were reduced to faint white lines. “Thank you, Headmaster,” Snape whispered.

“Are you frightened, Miss Magruder?” Dumbledore asked.

Heather's eyes were sad and tired, and Harry thought he could see Lupin in her. "Twenty-four hours ago, I thought I was a regular person and I honestly wondered if Harry was an alien... but this... I don't know... it's..." She trailed off. Harry put his arm around her; she bridled, but then seemed to relax slightly.

"Given the circumstances, you are handling yourself admirably," Dumbledore assured her.

It was clear that Heather had very little reserve left. She looked around the room, in a rising panic. "How did all of this happen?" she asked.

"I'd like to know that myself," Harry added.

Dumbledore explained, "Very little is known about the effects that two legilimens may have upon one another. Not many wizards possess the ability, and male legilimens outnumber females by at least three-to-one." He smiled faintly. "There are few opportunities for study."

"Did we do this to the room, to the entire city – what?" Heather asked nervously.

Snape said, "I briefly looked outside the door. It appears to be a line-of-sight phenomenon."

Heather asked Snape, "So you don't know anything about this? You've never been with someone else who can do this whatever-you-call-it?" Snape frowned but said nothing.

"How do we get them all to stop?" Harry wondered.

"A diffuse Enervate charm should be sufficient," said Dumbledore.

"An... Enervate charm?" Heather said, confused.

Dumbledore put on his Kindly Headmaster face, as Harry was beginning to sarcastically think of it. "The charm lends energy and wakefulness to the recipient. I carefully probed a few individuals.

They are not caught up in any meaningful way. The Enervate charm will get their attention, and they shall manage the rest on their own.”

Snape glared at Harry and added, “Rather like an opportunistic healing potion – which is something that you should have known for your O.W.L.s, of course.”

Harry smirked at Snape. “Why are you not, you know... snogging with the rest of them?” he asked.

“I was able to break free of the effect after a short time – as would any wizard worth his salt,” Snape sneered. Harry caught Snape’s furtive glance at the mysterious woman with the mobile phone, who sat on the steps at the far end of the stage and was apparently asleep. He smirked and Snape summoned a haughty glare.

Dumbledore took Heather’s hand – it was far too compassionate a gesture, Harry thought, and it left him a bit nauseous. “Miss Magruder, you require intensive instruction with regard to your ability, as soon as possible,” he intoned. “You have manifested a very powerful and immensely dangerous talent. I shall take responsibility for your training, with Professor Snape’s assistance.”

“Not a chance in hell!” Harry snapped.

Heather reached for his hand and squeezed it. “Not now,” she said quietly.

Snape cut in. “You should not speak about your ability or what has happened here,” he said. “Who is presently aware of it, outside of present company?”

“Remus and Shona,” Heather mumbled.

Snape bristled. “It is unwise for a Muggle to know of this, but I suppose that cannot be helped.”

“Ron doesn’t know?” Harry asked.

“We didn’t talk about it,” Heather said flatly.

"If she leaves immediately, we can avoid further questions," Snape pointed out to Dumbledore, "particularly from the Ministry personnel that are undoubtedly on their way."

Dumbledore nodded. "I am surprised that they have not already arrived." He returned to the Kindly Headmaster expression, as his attention shifted back to Heather. "It is best that the magical authorities remain unaware of your talent. I will escort you to Hogwarts. We will sort out the situation there, as soon as possible."

"Potter, you can take care of the rest of the Weasley brood," Snape ordered. "Mind that you avoid bringing around any of the Muggles. The Ministry will doubtless bring a horde of Obliviators. I must depart before they arrive."

"Mr. Snape?" Heather said.

"What?" Snape asked impatiently.

"You said this was a line-of-sight thing, right? It shouldn't happen through walls, then? So if I were ever in a similar situation..." Heather asked nervously.

"There's no risk of that," Lupin snarled. "Step away from him." Heather clutched Harry's arm.

"Remus, this is not the time –" Dumbledore began.

Lupin forcefully cut him off. "I'm not a schoolboy – don't presume to lecture me," he snapped.

Dumbledore tried again. "Remus, you're making a grave –"

"Don't," Remus barked, and then he turned on Harry. "I asked you, and you said you'd stay away. I asked you. When you decided to come with Luna, I assumed that you would respect that request to a reasonable extent." He waved his hand toward the bar. "Now that she's cuddled up with Ron Weasley, the real scenario is obvious enough. You planned this, didn't you?"



Harry's eyebrows shot up. "This? How on Earth could I have planned this?"

Lupin slowly began to shift from red to purple. "Don't play with me. You planned to come here and ingratiate yourself with my daughter, when I expressly asked you – and you agreed – to do no such thing."

Heather's jaw tightened at the word 'daughter'. "When I told you to sod off," she said stridently, "I meant it."

"The best thing for you would be to wake up tomorrow with a crushing headache and no memory of the last two weeks," Lupin snapped at her.

Snape stood back with his arms crossed and a smug look on his face, while Dumbledore tried again to intercede. "Remus, the young lady is seventeen," he pointed out. "She does have rights in this situation."

"She has the rights of a Squib, which is to say almost none. If she is here when the Obliviators come, they will remove any memories relating to magic," Lupin said. He was almost manic, and Harry found himself a little frightened. "All I have to do is keep her here, and the problem will be solved."

"That is hardly the best –" Dumbledore started.

"It's precisely what's best for her," Lupin shouted. "It's not best for me, and it's not best for Harry, but we're well accustomed to loss – we'll get over it!"

"She will eventually injure someone with that talent of hers, Lupin," Snape said. "You should have seen what she did to my hand. It was shockingly reminiscent of a werewolf attack."

Lupin whirled around in a fighting posture. "Shut your foul mouth," he snarled.

The corners of Snape's mouth twisted upward. "Does the beast wish a duel?"

Lupin pushed up his sleeves. “No,” he said, “I’d rather remind you what a werewolf attack is really like.”

“Stop it! Just stop it!” Heather cried.

“Accio wands!” Harry barked, and Snape and Lupin’s wands flew to him.

Dumbledore smiled approvingly, and held out his hand for the wands just as a frowning Amelia Bones appeared with a pop! She quickly surveyed the room, and smiled faintly.

“I really don’t want to know,” Madam Bones said. “Albus, you have no more than two minutes to resolve whatever requires resolution. After that, you’re going to have as few Aurors as possible, Cornelius Fudge, and a good-sized gaggle of reporters all bearing down on you.” She stared through her monocle at Harry, and added, “I suppose it should be expected that you’re here.”

“It’s nice to see you, too, ma’am,” Harry said, with the barest trace of a smile.

“I need to move as many as eight people from here to another location in Scotland with some haste. Only two of those are licensed to Apparate, and I am not certain it would be advisable in any case,” Dumbledore said.

“I have no knowledge of any ability that you may or may not possess to create potentially untraceable portkeys,” Madam Bones said flatly, and then abruptly Disapparated. Dumbledore barely managed to hand Snape his wand before the Potions Master was gone.

Dumbledore turned to Harry. “You will take this portkey, and use it to remove yourself, Miss Lovegood and Mister Weasley. Miss Magruder will be accompanying Professor Snape and myself.” He quickly made a portkey from a beverage napkin, thrust it into Harry’s hand, and pointed toward the bar.

“Like he she will,” Lupin growled. “She comes with you and me, Albus – not Snape.”

Heather abruptly flung herself at Harry. “Harry, what if they... look, I’m really scared...” she said awkwardly. Something about it seemed wrong, he thought – forced somehow. She mouthed ‘something for you’, and shoved a bit of paper into his hand.

“You can come with us,” Harry insisted.

“The portkey is specific, Harry. She can not,” Dumbledore said. He held out his hand to Heather.

Harry glared at Lupin, and spat, “If you do anything to her, anything at all, you’ll regret it.” Then he began to step over and around people, to make his way across the room.

Ron was sitting on the floor, his back against a barstool. Luna sat on his lap. Their lips were locked together, her hand was tracing across his chest, and they were completely unaware of the rest of the world. “If he hurts you, Luna, I’ll hurt him worse,” Harry said aloud. He spoke the incantation and flicked his wand.

Ron broke off the kiss. “What... I don’t... I was hungry, and then I... Luna!”

“That was... unexpected,” Luna said. “Tell me, where did you learn to kiss? Your instructors were clearly of very high quality.”

“Instructors? What are you on about?” Ron said, and he shook his head.

“That was a joke, Ronald,” she said, “an attempt a humour. Did you like it? Was I funny?”

“I suppose... ” Ron said. He blinked rapidly several times, and then looked up. “Harry! What the...?” He looked around and his jaw dropped. “Crikey - what happened?”

“Erm... it’s a long story...” Harry trailed off, uncertain what he should say. He settled for helping Ron and Luna to their feet.

Luna turned to Ron. “I am sorry that you felt compelled to kiss me.”

Ron straightened his hair by running his fingers through it. “Er, it’s all right,” he said absently. Luna stood up straight, her eyes wider than usual.

“There’s no time to explain,” Harry said, and held out the napkin. “Just take it, both of you.” As soon as Ron and Luna touched it, Harry felt the familiar tug and the three of them were gone.

A moment later, he fell to the floor in the Black tower’s Great Hall. Bill, Tonks and Ginny were already there; Bill and Ginny were arguing, and Tonks looked dazed.

“Looks like we have the time for a long story,” Ron said to Harry.

“I’m not in the mood,” snapped Harry.

Ron looked around the room. “Say... where’s Heather?”

“Being taken as far from me as Remus can arrange,” Harry returned.

Tonks’ eyes widened. “Harry... I saw what the two of you...” She stopped, cleared her throat, and continued awkwardly, “What I mean is, it was obvious that you were... um... are you all right?”

“No, I’m not,” Harry said flatly. He brushed himself off, and walked to the stairs without a word.

It was a clear, cool night. He thought about sitting on the beach. Then he thought about running off. He decided on returning to the bothy, for the moment. As he neared the cliff, he shouted, “Shacklebolt, don’t even think of jumping me!” There was no answer, and no rustling grass or other cues. He reached the bothy unmolested.

He couldn’t put Heather out of his mind, couldn’t silence all the memories. After an hour or two, it became apparent that Dumbledore

would not be making an appearance. He listened to music, thought quite a lot about Heather's lips and the feel of her in his arms, stared at Hermione's picture, and cursed loudly at the sodding prophecy and all those responsible for it. He rolled the crumpled scrap of paper from Heather around the top of his bureau, and decided that he couldn't look at it, not yet. Eventually he flopped onto the bed and drifted into an unsettled sleep.

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## Chapter Twenty-eight

### THE RESTAURANT AT THE END OF THE HOLIDAYS

August 28, 1996

Harry flung another stone from his perch atop the cliff, and watched it leave a tiny crater in the sands below. The next stone sent bits of crushed shells and jetsam skittering. With two more stones, Harry found himself thinking of Ron - falling through the sky of his own will, like he'd been diving off a cliff into a teacup. The higher the fall, the greater the splat, he thought. Maybe I should just jump off my broom and land on bloody Voldemort - boom, SPLAT. He winced, and the remaining stones in his hand slipped loose and clattered down the cliffside. There was a clang! in the distance, which was entirely unlike a pop!, whizz!, bang! or other sudden sound associated with magic, and he knew that he hadn't made it. He squinted toward the tower, just in time to see Mr. Lovegood slam shut another of the various panels on his van. Before the next clang, he scrambled up the path of trampled grass. The Lovegoods had returned to the tower six days after first leaving. In the face of Dumbledore's decision to withdraw, take everyone with him and leave Harry to his own devices, their return had been at once unexpected yet predictable. Mr. Lovegood had shrugged it off, by insisting that they had simply finished their Quibbler business to the north and preferred not to make the return to Devon in a single day. Harry knew that St. Ebb had been out of their way, but had said nothing.

As Harry approached, Odd Lovegood looked up from the engine of his van, and waved brightly. "Good morning, Harry!"

Every door of the van was flung open, and Harry saw luggage inside. "Are you leaving, then?" he asked.

"Leaving..." Mr. Lovegood mumbled absently. "Oh! Oh, yes - leaving." He looked blankly at Harry for a moment, and then his eyebrows shot up. "Goodness, me! Where were my manners? It's fortunate that I've found them." He stuck his hand out so rapidly that he nearly stumbled. "You've been a gracious host. Thank you."

Harry awkwardly shook Mr. Lovegood's hand. "Er... you really don't have to go..."

Mr. Lovegood rolled his eyes. "Say no more, Harry. Dumbledore's made a royal botch of things, you know. I imagine he learnt that from Croaker..." His face darkened for an instant, and then became the picture of joviality. "We've rarely seen eye to eye, the old man and me; in fact, I avoid being eye to eye with him."

There's Croaker again, Harry thought, and he made a mental note to follow up with Bill Weasley. "I don't trust Dumbledore, not anymore," Harry muttered bitterly.

Mr. Lovegood heard him. "Oh, you can trust him, Harry - don't fret about that. You should disagree with him on a regular basis, of course. If a few people would have done that along the way, we'd be living in a far more interesting world."

Harry goggled, and took several seconds to say slowly and hesitantly, "Right..."

Luna stepped through the black door, and deposited a small knapsack into the van. She caught Harry's eye and smiled. "Good morning!"

"You don't have to leave," Harry said quickly.

"We do have to leave," Luna returned. "We're two days behind Daddy's schedule. As it stands, he'll be pressed to get an issue out in time for the beginning of term. It really was good of you to let us stay here."

"So, um, I haven't scared you off?" Harry ventured.

Luna looked at him uncomprehendingly. "Scared us off? How would you go about doing that?"

Harry thrust his hands into his pockets. "I thought that after we went to Edinburgh, maybe you... I don't know..."

Luna walked slowly around the van, until she stood too close to Harry. "Everything has turned out precisely as was intended," she said plainly. "What could be frightening about that?"

"I swear I'm not asking you to go," Harry insisted.

Luna smiled. "You never asked us to come at the outset. I have appreciated the rest and the company, twice." She stood on her toes and kissed him on the cheek, then added casually, "I love you."

Harry gasped and turned bright crimson; he fervently hoped that he wouldn't faint.

Luna's large eyes widened. "Are you all right, Harry? Are you choking?"

Mr. Lovegood peered around the side of the van. "Remember what I told you about young men, Moonshine?"

"I believe Harry is choking," Luna reported.

"He's in shock. It'll pass," Mr. Lovegood laughed. He looked to Harry. "She loves you, Harry. So do many of the people close to you, I'll wager, and so do I. You should breathe now, I think." Harry looked back at Mr. Lovegood in sheer panic.

"Help me with the tools, would you?" Mr. Lovegood asked. Harry blankly followed him. Mr. Lovegood began putting various things into three large metal cases. Having no idea what he was supposed to do, Harry just stood there and watched.

"Love has many facets, Harry," Mr. Lovegood said without prompting. "Remember that." He closed the first metal case, and held it out to Harry. Harry tried to take it with one hand and nearly dropped it before bringing both hands to bear. He lugged it around the side of the van and nearly lost his grip before wrangling it inside.



Mr. Lovegood easily managed the other two cases. "Yours was the heaviest of the three," he laughed. "I'm three times your age – you have the back to spare."

Harry leaned heavily against the van. "Why tools? Why not just magic?" he groaned.

Mr. Lovegood set the other two cases into their places. "There's nothing magical about this van, nothing at all. As it was, it took a good three hours to negate the magical signature after Remus and I repaired the side panels."

Harry flinched at Lupin's name, but managed to let the anger flow away. Instead, he wondered aloud, "Why does it matter that the van's completely Muggle?"

"It's about stealth, Harry," Mr. Lovegood said seriously. "Without magic, the heliopaths never know that you're coming."

Mr. Lovegood closed up the van, and Harry went around to the passenger side. Luna rolled down the window, and Harry leaned against the door. "You're welcome back anytime," he assured her.

"Thank you, Harry. We're rarely invited back, you know," Luna said. She seemed to drift away, but then snapped back and added, "Do you need a lift into the village, for your appointments?"

Harry shook his head. "It's a nice day; who knows how many we'll have before fall sets in? I fancy a walk, actually."

Mr. Lovegood clambered behind the wheel. "We'll be back again," he said. "This would be a wonderful place to live – outstanding visibility."

Harry barely had a chance to step back before the van pulled away and tore down the lane.

As soon as he entered the tower, Dobby was upon him. "Harry Potter missed breakfast," he frowned. Harry decided that a house-elf's frown was a very amusing sight, but stifled a grin.

"I'm heading into St. Ebb now," Harry said. "I shan't be back until late."

"Dobby worries about Harry Potter's comings and goings," Dobby returned in a near-whisper. "He wonders what sorts of wizards might be watching."

Harry rolled his eyes at Dobby's fretting, but he was grateful that the house-elf had shown up, two days after everyone else had departed. If it hadn't been for Dobby, Harry feared that he might have still been awash in flocks of ruddy owls and the heads of unsolicited saleswizards popping up in the fireplace. Dobby had even accompanied him when he'd slipped on the Black signet ring and made his way into the master's study.

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A familiar voice sneered through the door, "Mister Potter... you have come to claim what is yours?"

Harry thrust his hands into his pockets nervously. "I suppose I have, yes," he said.

Phineas Nigellus' dark laughter rang out. "You are a Gryffindor through and through – aren't you, Mister Potter?" the voice mocked. "Did you think to ask what it is that you are claiming?"

Harry's jaw tightened. I won't be pushed by a bloody portrait, he thought. "I signed the will. I'm the heir to Sirius. Let's finish this – open the door... or I'll blast it open."

After several seconds of silence, Phineas Nigellus said, "Spoken like the heir to the House of Black, Mister Potter." There was an audible click! and the door's handle turned of its own accord.

Harry leaned forward and attempted to peer into the room beyond, but saw nothing save a greyish blur. "Come, boy – the room will not bite you," Phineas Nigellus mocked. Harry stepped forward into the grey void, as Dobby clung to his arm. A strong draft blew back his hair, and the void resolved into a room that was painfully familiar.

Harry walked to the centre of the large circular room, and ran his hand slowly along the edge of the claw-footed desk. He almost expected to see the Sorting Hat perched on the shelf behind the desk. The walls were covered with portraits, but Harry didn't recognise most of the wizards and witches depicted; most were unmoving, which mildly surprised him. "It's Dumbledore's office... er... a fair copy, at any rate," he observed.

Phineas Nigellus' cool voice filled the room. "That earns a grade of Acceptable, Mister Potter. This is my office. I summered in this house during my tenure as Headmaster, and identical offices proved to be an eminently practical choice."

As Harry turned to face the portrait, his eyes locked onto a familiar writhing visage – an aged woman in a black cap with taut yellowing skin. "Oh, no..." he groaned.

The woman's mad eyes steadied and she whirled to face him. "Begone, you half-blooded freak! You have no right to enter this sanctum! You are a stain on this house!"

Phineas Nigellus rolled his shrewd eyes. "Cease your odious caterwauling," he said. "This is your son's ward and heir, Harry Potter. Mister Potter, I doubt you have ever been properly introduced. This is Walburga Black, mother to Sirius Black and the most recent mistress of the House of Black."

"I have no sons! Regulus is dead, and... the other...is dead to me! He was a pathetic blood-traitor, an embarrassment that surrounded himself with scum and half-breeds! There are no heirs in my line of the House of Black – it is left to the Malfoys or the Lestranges to carry on!" Mrs. Black howled.

"Though Sirius was dead to you – though you burned his name from the House tapestry – you failed to disown him as a matter of law. Now that he is truly gone, the House of Black passes through him to his ward," Phineas Nigellus intoned.

Mrs. Black stopped moving, and Harry realised that the most disturbing thing about her portrait at Grimmauld Place had not been the screaming but instead the constant roiling motion. "To that? My House passes to THAT?" she spat. "Then the House of Black is dead. Listen well, you... abomination! Just as I retained a faithful servant after my death, so shall the Dark Lord's servants forever serve Him. You will never win. Even if He is somehow destroyed, you will never win! We shall triumph! The scum and filth will be rounded up, and purity will be restored!"

Harry walked toward the painting, fists clenched. "Sirius is dead – your son is dead!"

Mrs. Black's lips froze into a thin line. "The person to whom you refer died in the year nineteen hundred and seventy-seven," she snarled.

"Then there's no need for you to hang around, is there?" Harry seethed. He reached up, and firmly grabbed the frame around Mrs. Black's portrait. Despite pulling as hard as he could, he was unable to budge the frame. "Accio Mrs. Black's portrait!" he thundered. The frame shook against the wall and bits of plaster fell, but it remained in place and Mrs. Black indulged in cruel laughter.

Dobby glared at the cackling portrait, waggled his fingers and muttered something guttural and unaccountably dark. The portrait and a jagged portion of the wall to which it had been attached tumbled to the floor.

"Destroy me, but it changes nothing! You will never win! You are an abomination, and the Dark Lord shall rid us of you!" Mrs. Black shrieked.

Harry brandished his wand, and shouted "Iugulo!" over and over again until he rent the portrait and frame into pieces. "Incendio!" he cried, and the pile of oily canvas strips and slivers of wood burst into white-hot flames. When the flames died, only cinders remained. He snapped, "Scourgify!" until every trace of Mrs. Black's portrait was scrubbed clean.

“You continue to climb in my estimation, Mister Potter,” Phineas Nigellus said. “I have not heard the throat-slashing curse uttered for many a year; it was a rather dramatic choice.”

Harry’s blood ran cold, and he fell into thoughts of Luna and Bellatrix Lestrange, that led inevitably to Sirius. Dobby squeezed Harry’s hand, and then turned his glare on Phineas Nigellus. “Harry Potter is a great wizard and he is here to claim what is his,” he said tremulously.

Phineas Nigellus haughtily regarded Harry with shrewd heavy-lidded eyes. “An underfed half-blood and a freed house-elf... thus is the future of the House of Black,” the portrait sighed; its air of superiority reminded Harry of the Malfoys. “Very well. The House of Black lies at your feet... such as it is,” Phineas Nigellus went on. “I never held the belief that all those lacking purity of blood merited exclusion, let alone extermination. Headmaster Dumbledore correctly observes that such practices are self-destructive; if the current Dark Lord were successful, the wizarding world would eventually cease to exist. However, I do believe that careful husbandry of the remaining pure houses is in the best interests of all. Let me be clear, Mister Potter – to my mind, with the Black and Lestrange lines extinguished, the young Malfoy is the rightful heir to this House. Even the eldest Weasley son holds a more honest claim than do you. What Sirius has wrought is an artful dodge, to safeguard the assets of the House from the current Dark Lord and his minions. I respect his artistry; it was a shining example of his heritage. Moreover, I shall respect the legality of this dodge. Under the law, you are the master of the House of Black and I shall not prevent you from claiming what is yours –”

“Which is...?” Harry snapped.

Phineas Nigellus coolly arched an eyebrow. “You will show me respect,” he demanded, and his voice owned the room. Harry nodded, but fixed a level stare on the portrait.

The portrait smiled, and Harry wished that it would stop. “You have an unexpected grasp of position,” Phineas Nigellus smirked. “This tower is yours. The lands upon which it is situated are yours. The ancestral castle and grounds are also yours –”

“Er... Sirius ordered those sold, to replenish the Black Trust,” Harry said.

Phineas Nigellus scowled. “One cannot sell that which one does not own. The castle belongs to the master of the House of Black. Another may occupy it. It may even be paid for. It cannot be sold. The castle remains under your control, and it shall always remain under control of the master of this House. Now, if I might continue – without interruption... control of the House Trust is yours, as are any monies specifically assigned to you. Headmaster Dumbledore has explained your legal status to me, and I must therefore accept the custodial arrangements that have been put into place.” The portrait went silent, and Harry said nothing.

“Speak!” Phineas Nigellus exhorted.

Harry smirked at the portrait. “I didn’t want to interrupt you. Is there anything else?”

The blood-curdling smile returned to Phineas Nigellus’ face. “Knowledge, boy – you lay claim to knowledge. In the bowels of this tower, you will find a collection of magical artefacts and artifices that once was the greatest in private hands. You will also find the balance of my library. A sampling was kept at the London manor, and the leavings can be found in the reading room above us. There are texts and scrolls in the main collection that have not been examined for ten centuries. In addition, you inherit the collective experience of those depicted in this room. Every known charm, curse or potion has been brewed, cast or defended against by at least one wizard present here. Perhaps ‘the power that He knows not’ may be found amongst the books, or perhaps from my brethren on these walls?”

Harry’s mind raced. He’d thought about the knowledge that ghosts held; he’d asked Nearly-Headless Nick about the Veil, after all. He hadn’t really considered the knowledge that might be held by portraits, despite being constantly surrounded by them at Hogwarts. His eyes traced across the rows of faces – some were regal, some were haughty, and a few were thoroughly frightening. Have they really seen everything? he wondered. Is the answer here?

Dobby tugged hard on Harry's arm, until he bent down, and then whispered forcefully, "Dobby must speak to Harry Potter, but there are many ears within this room."

Harry resisted the impulse to turn and look again at the portraits. Instead he recalled Dumbledore's spell work at the birthday party, and casually flicked his wand until he could hear the faint echoes of their breathing inside the silent space. "All right, we're alone," he said quietly.

"Dobby wonders if there are many copies of Headmaster Nigellus' portrait?" the house-elf squeaked nervously.

Harry returned, "Three that I know of – Dumbledore's office, Grimmauld Place, and now here. Why?"

"Portraits always keep the secrets. Headmaster Dumbledore told me so, and he is a great wizard," Dobby said. "Headmaster Nigellus spoke a secret, Harry Potter. He said... I cannot say, but it is a secret – Harry Potter's secret." Dobby pointed a long finger toward the wall. "That one is a Malfoy. Dobby knows that there is one copy..."

Harry paled. "He wouldn't possibly... Dumbledore would obliterate him!" How did I miss that? he cursed himself. The silent space vanished abruptly, and he went round on Phineas Nigellus. "How is it that you could talk about 'the power that He knows not'?" he demanded. "How is it that you know everything of Sirius' will?"

Phineas Nigellus laughed. "Not certain about me, are you? Were you aware that Headmaster Dumbledore considered having me removed, early in his tenure? I believe that he is satisfied with the decision to leave me be. When a portrait receives information that originated from a person, even second-hand or third-hand, it may only reveal that information to a second person if the first person permits it. Even if the portraits in this room overhear us, none may share what we exchange unless you actively offer your permission to do so. As to the second question, there was much to be heard at Grimmauld Place over this summer – and still is."

Harry struggled to make sense of Phineas Nigellus' explanation. "But how... how do they know... I mean, if it's really third-hand, then somehow portraits have to remain aware of who said what, and when... how?"

Phineas stared at Harry as though he had just grown a second head. "Magic, of course! Surely you can't be so daft?"

Harry turned to Dobby. "Is this what you meant, when you were talking about portraits and secrets?" Dobby nodded mutely.

The portrait's face returned to a stony glare. "A measure of distrust is a wise thing to maintain, Mister Potter. I am not offended in the slightest that you distrust me. You'd do well to hold a measure in reserve for the house-elf, as well. How long has the toe-rag been free?"

"Harry Potter made M-m-master Malfoy free me, three years ago," Dobby said nervously.

Phineas Nigellus crooked an eyebrow. "Three years? Goodness, Mister Potter, I wonder if you recognise what you have on your hands."

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Phineas Nigellus hadn't elaborated, and they had moved on quickly to other business, but Harry did wonder what he had meant. Nonetheless, Dobby had proven at every turn that he could be trusted. True, the house-elf didn't always deliver what was intended, but Harry didn't doubt for an instant that he meant well.

Harry informed Dobby that he planned to walk to St. Ebb. He figured that Death Eaters or other undesirables would probably be looking for the Bonnie or a broom. Dobby frowned again, and Harry very nearly laughed. "Dobby would prefer to pop Harry Potter to where he is going," he offered.

"Harry Potter could try popping there himself," Harry returned with a sly grin.



Dobby's big eyes grew bigger. "Harry Potter needs much more practice before popping beyond what he can see!"

"There's the little matter of secrecy, Dobby - I was joking," insisted Harry. He frowned slightly, and added, "And I didn't take half the tower with me."

Dobby crossed his bony arms, and agitatedly tapped his foot. Harry winced at the thought of his memorable 'popping' lesson.

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"You really think that I... erm... 'popped'?" Harry asked.

Dobby nodded enthusiastically. "Harry Potter popped from the chair to Miss Granger – Dobby is certain of that."

Harry wasn't sure what to think. On the one hand, the possibility of understanding what had happened to him was enticing. On the other hand, the idea that he was performing house-elf magic was a bit disturbing. Looking for a simpler explanation, he asked, "Is popping the same thing as Apparation, then?"

"Popping is better than Apparation, Harry Potter," Dobby whispered, as though he were afraid of being overheard.

"How's that?" wondered Harry.

"Dobby can pop the sundries and the bags from the greengrocer, and Dobby can pop anywhere," the house-elf said proudly.

"Can you tell me how it works?" Harry asked quickly.

Dobby shrugged. "Dobby just pops, like Harry Potter just pops."

"If I am, uh, 'popping', then I don't know how or why I'm doing it," Harry sighed.

Dobby wiped at his brow, and then squinted at the ceiling and tapped his foot. “Dobby thinks popping is like walking, only faster. Dobby walks across the room, but only takes one step, and pop!”

“Just like walking...” Harry shook his head. “Do you say anything in particular, or maybe do that finger-wagging thing?”

Dobby fidgeted from foot to foot, and lowered his head. “Words are for wizards, Harry Potter. House-elves just do things.”

So Harry tried to ‘step’ across the great hall in the way of a house-elf. He tried, and he tried, and then he tried some more. His brow wrinkled in concentration, and then confusion. He broke into a sweat with the strain of thinking about the other side of the room, and absolutely nothing happened. Dobby continued to fidget, as though he were ready to say something but instead held back.

When Harry kicked at the floor in frustration, Dobby stepped forward and took Harry’s hand. He pointed at the opposite corner of the room, and said, “We pop there, Harry Potter.” The walls swam, and Harry felt like he was being sucked across the room at the same time as he was being shoved from behind. It wasn’t at all like the Floo, where there was really nothing to see. Dobby was right, Harry realised – it was rather like walking very fast. As suddenly as they had started forward, they stopped, and Harry somersaulted into the wall.

Harry groaned, and gingerly moved one limb at a time. Dobby immediately started to bang his head against the floor, and Harry had to topple him in order to stop the punishment. The house-elf cried, “Dobby is a menace! Harry Potter could have popped into the wall!”

“It’s all right, it’s all right!” Harry insisted. “I’m glad you did it. I... I felt what you did, and it makes sense now, I think.” He stood up, and gave the opposite wall of the hall a determined look. He closed his eyes, and thought hard about how the magic had felt, the way it had swirled around him and through him. A breeze rushed through the hall, as though the windows had been opened.

Dobby squealed, “No, Harry Potter! It is different to pop –” just as the hall began to contract. There was a powerful rush of air and a

squelching sound, like a door being magically sealed. Harry reached the opposite wall in a flash; he barely had a chance to brace himself before he passed right through it. He screamed and abruptly came to a stop, ten feet outside the wall and fifteen feet above the courtyard. His shoulder issued a crack! as he landed, followed by a reprise of the squelching sound. Half the contents of the serving table, two tapestries, an Oriental rug and shards of glass from three windows fell on top of him.

There was a quiet pop! as Dobby appeared beside him. "Harry Potter does not listen! It is different to pop alone than with another," he said crossly.

"Ouch," Harry managed.

Dobby looked at the pile of debris, and shook his head. "Harry Potter must like the cleaning and the repairing," he muttered.

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"It wasn't half the tower," Harry muttered.

Dobby continued to tap his foot. "There will be no popping by Harry Potter today," he squeaked.

Harry winced. "I'm sorry, Dobby," he said earnestly. "Look, I appreciate everything you've done - I was going spare when you showed up. I'm not trying to make trouble for you, and I'm grateful that you're teaching me -"

Dobby's eyes watered. "Dobby is teaching the great Harry Potter... Dobby is beside himself, even though he can't be beside himself! Dobby was being wretched..." The house-elf eyed a doorframe suspiciously, and Harry put himself between Dobby and the door.

"No punishment," Harry said firmly. "I thought we had an understanding."

Dobby bowed his head. "Of course, Harry Potter."

Harry patted Dobby on the back, and sped out the door. Immediately, he took a page from Shackbolt and silenced his footfalls. It wasn't something that would stand out to a Muggle, he figured, but it might make the difference in an encounter with a wizard. He disillusioned himself until he was well on the way to St. Ebb. Between a light Confundus charm, a glamour that lent his hair a brown cast, a wire-rimmed pair of spectacles different from his usual style, and unnaturally quiet feet, he managed to avoid a single wayward glance along the five miles of empty rural carriageways and teeming village lanes.

He ducked into an empty alley and ended the glamour. Back on the high street, he hesitated at a familiar door, but The Greek spotted him and gave a not-entirely-unfriendly wave. There was no choice now, not that there had really been a choice at all. Harry walked into L'Oiseau Chanteur cloaked in tattered confidence, and allowed himself to be led to the small table - a two-top, Harry recalled - set discreetly near the kitchen.

The Greek abruptly sat down across from Harry, who nearly dropped his serviette in shock. "You are not so good today," he said in a thick, heavily accented voice that sounded like hammers crushing rock.

"I'm fine, thank you," Harry responded evenly, though his left leg was jittering beneath the tablecloth.

"Shona, she is plenty mad, you know," The Greek offered casually. "Ready to chop everyone like, ehh, aubergine - but she starts with you."

"Erm, glad to know that in advance, I guess," Harry managed.

The Greek waved his hand dismissively. "All talk, Shona. Still... you see her with the big knife, you run outside, okay?" He laughed like a man to whom laughter did not come easily, and then clapped Harry on the shoulder as he rose.

Harry froze, and spluttered, "I'll... I'll keep that in mind..."

"You want drink?" The Greek asked. "Not wine - you need clear head, you know, in case." He made a show of removing the sharpest knife from the place setting opposite Harry, and then broke into grinding laughter.

Harry squirmed, and squeaked, "Just water for me, thanks."

"She comes after the noon tasting is done, yes? Your Mister Tonka, he come at one, and then your Professor Dimple come at three, and then the last one come... after that," The Greek rattled off. "Busy day for you."

Harry nodded. "Busy day," he repeated.

"I talk to you later, ehh," The Greek grunted, then snapped his fingers and pointed harshly at a busboy, who in turn scuttled to the table with a full pitcher of water and a glass.

Harry watched Shona through the entry to the kitchen, as she barked at the servers about the day's menu. He wondered what had possessed her to contact him, and what had possessed him to respond. The servers fanned out to their stations, the kitchen staff turned back to their six-burners and broilers and stockpots, and Shona strode purposefully toward Harry's table. He couldn't crawl beneath the table – not only was it too late, but the table was too small. She left behind her apron, the one with the belt and the loops that held a variety of very sharp things, and he took that as a hopeful sign.

Before Harry could finish thinking about what to say, Shona grabbed the chair opposite him, twirled it around, flopped onto the seat, leant forward against the chair's back, and growled, "Yer a pain in the arse, the both of yeh... och, all three of yeh."

If Moody had said that, or Tonks, Harry would have snapped back or at least have attempted a smart remark. With Shona, it was different; something about her brooked no disagreement. Instead, he simply said, "Hello, Shona."

She took the pitcher of water from the table, filled the glass, and drank it down. When the glass was empty, she set it down firmly, and slowly let out an exasperated sigh. "Figured I'd corner yeh while he was still down and out. He's curled up in the cottage."

Harry's eyebrows rose slowly, until he was fairly sure they would eventually reach the back of his head. "But he's... I mean, he doesn't have the, er, medicine that he used to take..."

"He won't hurt me," she said flatly.

Harry began to worry for Shona, and wondered if he still had it in him to worry about Lupin. "He wouldn't mean to hurt you," he returned.

"We've both been hurt enough. He won't hurt me," she repeated.

"What about Heather, then?" he demanded.

"She isn't here," Shona returned.

Harry let it drop. "Why did you want to see me?" he asked.

Shona fiddled with the tablecloth, and didn't meet his eyes. It didn't seem like something she would do, and Harry didn't know what to make of it "Yeh need ta patch things up," she said quickly. "This is killin' him."

"I need to patch things up?" Harry barked, and Shona's head snapped up. "I need to patch things up?" he repeated in a much quieter voice. "He knows where to find me. If he thinks I'll come crawling to him and Dumbledore, then he doesn't know me at all."

"Remus doesn't know yer here, and he's in no shape ta know anythin' today," Shona shot back. "I'm sayin' yeh need ta patch things up."

Harry nearly shouted back at her, but her nervousness had startled him, and there was something even more disconcerting about the look on her face. He fidgeted a bit, then said, "I'm listening."

She crossed her arms defensively and chewed on her lower lip, and waited until well after he became uncomfortable with the silence. “No point in getting’ all girly on yeh, but... here’s the thing. I know people,” she said. “Yer thinkin’ Shona’s a nasty bint, so how could she know people, but it’s the truth. Yeh cannae make a livin’ in this business if yeh cannae size people up –cooks, suppliers, patrons...” she stopped, and added with a smirk, “...effin’ critics... all of them, yeh know?”

The corners of Harry’s mouth flickered just a little. “Yeah, I know about critics,” he allowed, “and I don’t think you’re a, you know... a bint.”

Shona snorted, and went on, “Remus, he hasn’t changed much. He’d be the last ta say so, but he’s...” she stopped, and Harry waited for her to go on. “...he’s more of everything than he was, when I knew him. He was intense, now he’s more intense. He was loyal, now he’s more loyal. He was...” She suddenly grinned, and Harry was completely thrown off. “Well, that’s not yer business. He’s... he’s just more, but he’s the same person, right?”

She paused again, and Harry wondered whether to say something; he just couldn’t grasp where she was heading. “I’m not getting this,” he blurted out.

“When yeh want ta size up a person, yeh have ta get in his head,” she instructed. “With Remus... all his friends are dead and buried, he thought I was dead – and that he’d made it happen – and he dinnae know a thing about Heather. Then he shows up here and it all turns upside down fer him. How did yeh expect he’d feel?”

“I’d expect him to be happy, I guess,” Harry returned. “I’d expect he’d want you to be part of his life. I thought I was part of that, too.”

“I said yeh have ta get in his head,” chided Shona. “He lost damn near everythin’, and now some of it comes back. He’s scared – thinks that if he blinks, it’ll disappear.” She laughed, but it was hollow. “I ran away from livin’ fer ten years – gave up my own daughter over it – and he doesn’t think he deserves me. Heather’s shat on him fer a week, and he just took it; said she has every right ta do it. All that, and he’d stand up fer us just because of who we are, you know?”

“That I’d believe,” Harry muttered, because he’d seen it. He couldn’t escape thoughts of the morning after the club, when he’d walked into the row that had set everything else in motion.

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Ron and Ginny sat on the stairs that led to the great hall. No one inside the hall had bothered to cast a silencing charm. Harry could hear Mrs. Weasley’s voice through the door, raised to a pitch that could cut glass and interspersed with Lupin’s very unwelcome growl. Ginny was on the cusp of either screaming or spewing up, and Ron was clearly stricken. Harry pulled out his wand, quietly muttered ‘Everbero’, and flicked toward the sealed door three times.

The shouting inside the hall stopped. Someone inside – Harry couldn’t make out the voice for certain – shouted, “What in Merlin’s name was that?”

Mrs. Weasley – there was no mistaking her voice, Harry thought – said, “Neither Ron nor Ginny would bang loud enough to wake the dead unless... oh, good heavens!” There was a loud popping-squelching sound, and the door flew open.

Harry burst through, very nearly running down Mrs. Weasley, and demanded, “What’s going on here?”

Mrs. Weasley gasped. “Harry, dear – there you are! Is everyone all right? Tell me everyone’s all right! Ron and Ginny –”

“Are just fine,” Harry snarled. “I didn’t expect to hear shouting in my home, or to be locked out of my hall, so I knocked.”

Mrs. Weasley resorted to nervous shuffling, and Harry saw that Tonks was taking close notice of her own feet. Mr. Weasley offered earnestly, “Harry, we should have owled first – our apologies.”

Harry relented a bit. “That’s not necessary,” he said, but then added with some bitterness, “It seems this is becoming the new Headquarters.”



“Let me look at you. Have you been eating properly?” Mrs. Weasley asked, and moved as if to embrace him. He sidestepped her, and her eyebrows beetled.

“I’ve eaten very well,” he said, “better than Hogwarts, I think.” His eyes passed from the elder Weasleys to Bill, then Tonks, and finally to Remus Lupin. He rode out a wave of loathing, and then added flatly, “Shona’s a brilliant chef.”

Mrs. Weasley looked from Harry to Lupin and back to Harry again. “Arthur’s right, of course. We didn’t mean to intrude,” she said.

“I’m becoming accustomed to uninvited guests,” Harry said coldly. “Besides, I’ve always been welcome at the Burrow, and your family is always welcome here. Are the apologies for the shouting, then, or are you just sorry that I walked in on it?”

Mrs. Weasley flushed. “I see that we are intruding,” she said sharply. “We’ll take this elsewhere.”

Harry barked at Lupin, “So, why are you here?”

Lupin’s face was redder than Harry could remember ever having seen it. “I came with the intention of talking to you about what happened last evening. I expected the possibility of a screaming row with you. I hadn’t considered the possibility of one with her.”

Harry watched Lupin shift from red to something more violet, and Mrs. Weasley glower unflinchingly, before he asked, “Will someone tell me what’s happened here?”

“This is something that Molly and Remus need to work out, Harry. It might be best to let them alone – perhaps the rest of us should take our leave?” Mr. Weasley offered.

“No,” Harry said firmly. “I won’t have this in my house. Settle it here and now, or everyone leaves.”

“Agreed,” Lupin seethed.

Mrs. Weasley smiled indulgently at Harry, and it only served to irritate him. "Arthur is right, Harry. I'm sure that Ron and Ginny would love to talk to you –" she began.

Harry crossed his arms. "Sending me out with the children, are you?" Mrs. Weasley moved as if to scold him, then caught his eyes and stood stock still.

"This is none of your affair, Harry," Lupin warned.

When Lupin refused to say anything more, and it was clear that the elder Weasleys were not going to offer an explanation, Harry looked to Tonks. "Well? Spit it out!"

Tonks laughed nervously. "Not treading into the middle of this – sorry."

Harry turned to Bill. "And you?"

Bill held his hands up. "This was supposed to be about the violin," he insisted.

"So what is it about now?" Harry shouted in exasperation. "Look, no one's leaving this room until I know what all this is about!"

Mr. Weasley said, "Mostly it seems to be about obstinance," and Mrs. Weasley shot him a wicked glare.

Lupin advanced on Harry. "Very well, since you insist upon forcing the issue... it appears that my daughter isn't good enough to associate with Mrs. Weasley's children – which is just as well," he said bitterly.

"I didn't say that," Mrs. Weasley protested.

Lupin edged forward on the balls of his feet, and Harry's hand tightened around his wand. Harry mustered the calmest voice he could manage. "What did you say, then?" he asked.

"She referred to Heather as a round-heeled trollop," Lupin said through clenched teeth.

Mrs. Weasley looked away. "I apologise for that," she said. "It was said in the heat of the moment, and it was uncalled for."

Harry's wand shook in his fist. "Uncalled for? I'd say that's just a start!" he snarled.

"Some things cannot be wished away," Lupin said dangerously, teeth still clenched.

Harry felt the anger flood into him, and he didn't care. "You come into my home, and you say that about my friend?" His voice dropped, his eyes narrowed, and he spat, "Who in the hell do you think you are?"

Mrs. Weasley turned her ire on him. "Mind your language, Harry! Tell me, what kind of 'friend' would take up with both you and my poor Ron in a single day? What kind of 'friend' would corrupt my Ginny into life as a... a...minstrel! And she may not be a trollop, Remus, but I understand that she dresses as one!"

Mr. Weasley moved forward, and put her hand on her arm. "Molly, stop this," he said. "There's nothing to be gained, and a great deal to be lost."

"I suppose it's perfectly acceptable amongst her sort to behave in that way," Mrs. Weasley said emphatically, "but it's not acceptable with respect to my family."

Lupin stormed toward Mrs. Weasley, so quickly that Mr. Weasley jumped between them. "Heather is my daughter, and I will not tolerate your denigration of her," he growled.

Harry felt the heat of anger rush into him. "Her sort is my sort," he said quietly.

Lupin and Mrs. Weasley continued to bark at each other, as Harry boiled. "I said, her sort is my sort," he interjected more forcefully, but the squabble continued apace.

“Harry... um... are you all right? You... er... you look a bit off...” Tonks stammered. She slid her chair backward noticeably.

“You’re a sight, Harry,” Mr. Weasley said with concern. “Perhaps you should sit for a moment.” He looked to his wife and added, “Perhaps we all should sit.”

“Didn’t anyone hear me? I said, Heather’s sort is my sort!” Harry roared, and the windows rattled.

Mrs. Weasley’s eyes widened. “Oh, Harry! I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it like that at all!”

Mr. Weasley insisted, “Let’s take a seat – everyone – and talk this through. We’ll handle this with dignity.”

As Mrs. Weasley edged toward a chair, Lupin glared at Mr. Weasley. “Your wife is holding my daughter responsible for your children’s behaviour. The only thing to be handled is an apology.”

Mrs. Weasley stood bolt upright. “Fancy yourself an expert on raising a child, do you?” she screeched. “Look me in the eye and tell me that your daughter behaved appropriately last night, and we’ll discuss apologies.”

Harry’s reserve ran out. He shouted, “HAS EVERYONE HERE GONE MAD?”

Mrs. Weasley’s jaw dropped but Harry paid no mind. He bore down on her, his voice increasingly more powerful. “First, Heather didn’t take up with Ron. Second, she hasn’t taken up with me, either.” He jabbed his finger angrily at Lupin. “He’s going to see to that, I can assure you! Third, she invited Ginny to play with her bloody band last night – ONCE – so I’m lost as to how Ginny has been ruined somehow. Fourth, you’re all barking about the bloody violin! Have Professor Flitwick look over the damned thing! Sweet Merlin! Maybe being tossed out of the room like a stupid child isn’t so bad, if this is how you go on!”

“Harry... let’s just sit, please?” Mr. Weasley asked plaintively.

“Arthur’s right, Harry,” Lupin added quietly; “I’ve gone too far.”

Harry ignored both of them. He was burning, and he felt like the burning would stop if he just spoke his peace. He kept his eyes on Mrs. Weasley. “I expect this kind of rubbish from the Daily Sodding Prophet. To hear it from you... it’s like fourth year again. I don’t know what to think. I know you lost your home... you could have died, and... and most of your family along with you... all because you know me... because you’ve stood up for me, taken me in. So you can be angry with me. You should be angry with me, but don’t you... don’t you dare take this out on Heather! You don’t know her; you don’t know anything about her! For Merlin’s sake, she’s been drawn into all of this whether she likes it or not, and I know how that feels! I won’t let you do that to her. I won’t have it... do you hear me? I won’t have it! Hate me – hate ME, damn it!” He paced nervously, unaware that all the people in the room save Lupin were edging back.

“Look at us!” Harry shouted. “We’re standing here, fighting over nothing, and Voldemort’s an arm’s length away – just waiting to kill everyone here! I’m no better – I’ve spent my summer running! I ran here, and there’s no running from him... from this. I’m tired of it! I’m tired of people being hurt. I’m tired of running! I’ve had enough! This needs to END!” All the windows in the great hall exploded as one. He fell to his knees, grabbed the edge of the table tightly to steady himself, and watched in horror as the wood smoked and crumbled in his grasp.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ron rush toward him from the open doorway. “Don’t!” he croaked. “Stay where you are!”

Just as at the Grangers’, Harry felt a hand on his back. “Nonsense,” Mr. Weasley said calmly. “You’d never hurt any of us. I know that, even if you don’t.” Mr. Weasley extended his other hand to help Harry up. Harry refused it, and remained kneeling.

Mrs. Weasley teetered between shock and concern. “What... can we do for you, Harry?” she asked, her hands trembling.

“Just leave – all of you,” he said quietly.

Tonks was the only one who dared speak. “That’s the one thing we can’t do,” she returned.

Harry stood slowly. “I’m going for a walk. When I come back, I expect you’ll all be gone.”

“Harry, it’s not safe –” Tonks began.

“You’re right – it’s not safe,” Harry snapped, as he gestured at the burned table and scattered shards of glass; “Get out, all of you!” Then he stormed down the stairs, brushed past Ginny and burst through the black door and away from all of them.

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“...tryin’ to protect Heather, right?” Shona looked at Harry expectantly, and he blinked hard.

He blushed faintly. “Erm... sorry?”

“I said, he’s not tryin’ ta hurt yeh, he’s tryin’ to protect Heather, that’s all,” Shona repeated. “He doesn’t know what ta do, and he’s drownin’ in it.”

“Didn’t even say goodbye to her,” Harry muttered.

Shona didn’t seem to hear. “He’s been tryin’ ta convince her that she should forget the whole thing. I mean, really forget it, you know? He tried the same with me.”

Harry gripped the edge of the table, and willed himself to feel cold. “W-what did she say? What did you say?”

“Calm yerself, Harry. I won’t have a scene here,” Shona said quietly but forcefully. She refilled the glass from the pitcher of water, and shoved it into his hands. Harry sipped at it between breaths. After several sips, he said, “Well?”

Shona smirked. "I told him it was hard ta know where his arse stopped and his head started. Good enough for yeh?" He pressed his serviette to his lips to keep from spraying water. She added, "And Heather? She can look after herself. She says the old man's worried about this thing she can do. I pressed Remus and he said the same. The other one – Snip, or Skip, or whatever he is – well, yeh'd be daft ta trust that one." Harry buried his whole face in the serviette and shook with laughter.

"Not yer favourite?" she asked.

"No," he blurted between chortles, "but you have him right in one."

She studied him carefully and said nothing, for long after he settled himself. He found it unnerving. She was proving to be as up-and-down as Heather, and Harry hadn't expected that.

Her voice was low and quiet when she spoke again. "Things coulda been so different, you know. Even if everything had went to hell anyway, yeh could have been with..." She sighed, took the glass from him, and drained it. "Yeh'd have grown up with someone that cared for yeh. Heather woulda grown up right, not with that hag of a cousin – and that's all on me, I know that. Yeh'd have had a sister of sorts, maybe." Her eyes took on a far-off quality, and she finished in a near-whisper, "So different..."

"I'm sorry that it..." Harry started, but he trailed off. "I'm just sorry."

"Tell him that, don't tell me," Shona said. "He needs yeh – and I think yeh need him, even if yeh don't see it now."

Harry hesitated, then said, "I can't do that. I'm not sorry for what I said."

Shona's eyes widened. "Yeh have ta be sorry! Yeh can't have meant \_"

Harry stiffened. "He meant everything, all of it," he insisted, "and I meant what I said as well."

“I told you yeh have ta get inside his head, ta understand –” Shona started.

“How do you think I know he meant it all?” Harry asked coldly. “I didn’t even have to try, you know? He was wearing it like a bloody robe. I’m responsible for my parents’ deaths, and he loathes me for it... for... for getting Sirius... killed... he...” He stopped and squeezed the edge of the table, but tried to keep the icy-cold pitcher in his mind.

“Harry... lad... yeh can’t carry this. It’ll eat yeh up – I know,” Shona offered.

“I can’t forgive him for that, not even if he’s right,” Harry said firmly.

“It was fear talkin’, and no more,” insisted Shona. “If yeh hadna... yeh know... had yer little moment with Heather, he wouldna –”

Harry released his grip on the table as he felt a wash of anger. “It wasn’t a little moment,” he shot back. “It was a lot more than that.”

Shona’s eyes narrowed. “Yeh knew her fer what, two weeks? Don’t make more of it than it was.”

Harry glared at her. “Knew her? Funny, I don’t think of Heather as being in my past.”

Shona pursed her lips. “Yeh’d better start.”

“You sound exactly like him,” sneered Harry. “If that’s how you feel, we’ve nothing to talk about.”

“Don’t yeh think it’s best ta stay away? Can’t yeh see that?” Shona retorted.

Harry took advantage of the days he’d had to replay his falling out with Lupin. “What if Remus had explained everything straight away, say two weeks after you met? Would you have run away? Would you have let him run away?”

“It was different,” Shona snarled.



“After just two weeks? How was it any different?” Harry demanded.

She shouted back, “Because we knew it was us – me and him – not some mad bit of...” and then suddenly stopped herself. She finished in a whisper, “...some mad bit of magic, makin’ us all bothered fer each other.”

“It wasn’t like that!” Harry shot back. Servers and patrons were looking at them, he realised, and he tried to force all the frustration back inside. “What about you?” he muttered with his eyes closed. “It’s not like you knew him for years. Why wasn’t that magic?”

Shona shook her head. “It was me and him, no question,” she said.

“Then why is it any different with me and Heather – because you’re her mum?” Harry blurted out.

Shona looked down at her hands. “Seven years, off and on, and I’ve seen Heather keep a head fer two things, and two things only – her music and herself,” she answered. “She’s mine and I’m proud o’ what she’s done, but she’s got no room fer yeh and that’s the truth of it.”

Harry shook his head. “I know her,” he insisted. “I saw everything. You’re wrong.”

“I won’t sit by and let her get herself killed fer want of a warm bed,” Shona snapped.

Harry burst into a coughing fit. “You... think that’s... what I... see in her?” he managed. “She’s my friend.”

“I think she gets lonely, and she gets wrapped up for a month or so, and then there’s something else ta do – that’s what I think,” Shona said. “I like yeh – hope yeh know that – but she’s not right fer yeh and yer no good fer her neither.”

Harry’s face burned crimson, and he fumbled for words. “Why does it matter that... that I forgive him, then – answer me that? He... he has you... you have both of them – looks like... it looks like everyone’s

fine, doesn't it?" He crossed his arms, and added forcefully, "He doesn't need anything from me, and I won't need anything from him in a year or two."

"Yeh don't have ta make it this way –" Shona started.

"How else am I supposed to make it?" Harry wondered aloud. He looked away, and sighed, "Tell him... tell him I'm sorry it has to be like this."

Shona sat there quietly for a few moments, then glanced over her shoulder at the kitchen. A frown flashed across her face, and then she sighed before turning to Harry. "Do yer business, then," she said. "Eat here when yeh want – I won't stop yeh. Come see Remus when yeh want – I'll point yeh to him. But listen to me, boy: stay away from Heather. I'm asking yeh now; go behind my back, and I won't be askin' the next time." Harry resolutely kept his mouth closed. She stood, and added, "Yeh don't have ta fear Remus on this. Get her crossed up with your business, and all the stick-wavin' in the world won't save yeh from me... and yer food'll be out in a spiff."

Harry felt like all the air had bled out of his lungs, but he succeeded in squeaking, "I didn't order."

"Yeh'll get what I give yeh," Shona snorted, and strode into her domain. What she gave him was a meal adventuresome by any standard, but Harry refused to be defeated. The servers gaped at him periodically, as if he were mad to keep eating.

The Greek, for his part, seemed to weigh Harry's odds of survival with each glance. "How you doing? You quit yet?" he asked each time that he passed. "Slower than the knife, ehh," he grunted another time, and then indulged a throaty laugh. At length, Harry ate every bite; his stomach gurgled, but he was victorious. By the time Ted Tonks entered the restaurant, plates were cleared, place settings replaced, and water glasses filled.

Mr. Tonks looked grim. He gave Harry a curt nod and set his valise atop the table. Rummaging inside, he withdrew a small glittering box; he touched its sides in a pattern, which drew a faint glow, and placed

it next to the valise. Then he tucked in and said flatly, "Good afternoon." With a glance at the box, he added, "It seems best to assure our privacy."

"Thank you for coming," Harry said. "Erm... how are you?"

"Fine. How's your jaw?" Mr. Tonks muttered as he reached down and rummaged through the valise.

Harry's cheeks flushed. "It's not sore anymore," he mumbled.

"Dora visited last evening, and provided me with her version of recent events," Mr. Tonks snapped. "I'm not sorry she laid you out, Harry," Mr. Tonks frowned. "I imagine that you were trying to make her shove off, but what you said to her... bringing Sirius into it was reprehensible." Harry studied the carpeting, but nodded.

Mr. Tonks shoved a file folder toward Harry and said, "I'm glad you have the good sense not to offer excuses. When Dumbledore calls an end to this nonsense of his, I expect you'll apologise to her – not because I say so, but because you wronged her and a sensible adult offers amends when he wrongs someone." Harry began to speak up, but Mr. Tonks added, "Being wronged by someone, even for an extended period, doesn't require or even justify that you respond in kind. I've told Dora this. I've also said the same to Remus. This applies to you as well, Harry, and I'd add Dumbledore to that list if he'd deign to listen."

Harry sat back in his chair, and felt more than a bit off-balance. "How did you...?"

"Anticipate where you were headed? It's part and parcel with my profession... and I'm good at it, as it happens," Mr. Tonks answered with a smirk. "Good thing, given that I'm both disorganised and perfectly lacking in practical skills."

Harry's eyes widened. "Disorganised? But how...?"

“It’s all Andromeda,” Mr. Tonks admitted. “Without her, I couldn’t find my robes in the morning.” He took on a slightly wistful look and fell silent.

“Er... do you want to order?” Harry asked.

“Thank you, no,” Mr. Tonks returned. “The food’s lovely here, but I have to mind what I eat – the joys of mid-life, and all that. Shall we just press on with things?”

When Harry nodded, Mr. Tonks launched into an update on his progress with returning relief payments to the residents of St. Ebb. Well over half had gladly accepted the repayment with interest. A few had experienced serious hardships as a result of Diggle’s efforts, and Mr. Tonks was proceeding with settlements that befit the circumstances. A few chose to hold out, in hopes of more generous terms. Mr. Tonks pointed out that these had limited recourse, and advised distribution of cheques; he figured that some would simply cash the cheques on receipt, and that would be the end of it.

“What about the rest – the ones who don’t take the cheques?” Harry asked.

Mr. Tonks nodded, as he returned, “Two more, perhaps three, will continue to hedge; they’ll eventually take the cheques, I suspect. I see one or two choosing to set a solicitor after you. As you’re overpaying for my representation, I’ll set about having their claims quashed.”

“After Diggle, I don’t think I’m overpaying you,” Harry said.

Mr. Tonks laughed. “The fees from this work alone will exceed my net earnings from last year, Harry. You might be better served by simply taking a solicitor into your employ.”

Harry lit up. “You’d be interested in that?”

Mr. Tonks harrumphed for a moment, then recovered. “I prefer working on behalf of others to working for others, and it’s not healthy

for a practice to rely on a single client. If you continue to require the lion's share of my time, I'll bring on additional associates."

"Erm... how large is your business? Do I take up a lot of people?" Harry wondered.

Mr. Tonks turned very serious. "Our associates have no connection to your affairs. No one save Andromeda and me can access any documents, correspondence or other materials relating to you in any way. As far as others in my chambers are concerned, you don't exist. You're too important and you live at too much risk for any chances to be taken." His expression lightened a bit, and he hastily added, "Besides, if anything happened to you and I was responsible for it, I'd be turned out of my own home."

Harry opened the folder before him, and began to idly page through. "English... er, these are written in English, aren't they?" he mumbled.

"Remus was rather insistent," Mr. Tonks said delicately, as he settled back into his chair. "I held these until today, hoping that he'd come to his senses, but... he's more or less foisted you upon me, Harry."

Harry's eyebrows beetled in confusion. "Foisted... what?"

Mr. Tonks pointed to the file folder. "You can read it all at your leisure, but I'll sum up. Remus can't surrender his responsibilities to the Black Trust, for a variety of reasons – for one, the arrangement was magically binding – but he's not irrevocably obligated with regard to conservatorship. Frankly, there's little to be done. The only area where you require approval is in the matter of entering into binding contracts, and that's at issue in England only – not in Scotland. At any rate, he's decided on an ordinary power of attorney, which –" He reached out and shook the edge of the folder lightly. Harry looked up, startled. "I'll cut to the quick. Remus has authorised me to approve your dealings in his stead, for the next six months," Mr. Tonks finished.

Harry dropped the sheaf of papers in his hand. "Six months... I... I see..."

“This is for the best, isn’t it?” Mr. Tonks offered.

Harry quickly looked up from his search for stray documents. “What is that supposed to mean?” he snapped.

“This does appear to be what you wanted,” Mr. Tonks explained casually. “You’ve systematically pushed away everyone directly connected to Dumbledore, after all.”

“Dumbledore did this. I didn’t do this,” insisted Harry. “He’s the one who appeared at my door, and said that it was time for me to take my place as an adult. He’s the one who took away the Or... the old crowd. He’s the one who ordered everyone to stay away.”

“I’m not holding Dumbledore blameless here,” Mr. Tonks said. “However, you’ve assumed that everyone simply jumps to his tune, haven’t you? Either that’s the case, or you’re pushing everyone away.”

“They all left,” Harry responded flatly.

“I didn’t leave because of Dumbledore; I left because you asked us to leave. The Lovegoods did the same,” returned Mr. Tonks. “Remus... well, Remus is managing to be piggish on his own. What about Bill Weasley? I understand he left behind a note of some kind?”

Harry wondered how on Earth Mr. Tonks knew about Bill’s note. “How did...? He told Tonks? But she might have talked to...”

Mr. Tonks frowned. “She didn’t. For one, she seems to fancy him – this week, at any rate. In fact, despite your behaviour toward her, Dora has a considerable appreciation for you.” He took off his reading spectacles, rubbed at them with the end of his tie, and added, “I suspect you don’t actually know her, or Bill for that matter.”

‘How would I have known anyone at all before this summer, other than the Weasleys or...?’ Harry hesitated and cleared his throat. ‘You haven’t found Hermione, have you? I nearly forgot to ask how that was coming.’

Mr. Tonks grimaced. 'I was getting there. No, I haven't been able to find out exactly where the Grangers have gone. I don't believe Dora knows, by the way. However, I was told that Hermione Granger sent you a post –'

Harry sat up excitedly. 'When? Where is it? I mean, I haven't seen any...' He stopped when Mr. Tonks winced.

'Well... the thing is... taking everything into account... the post most likely arrived on the 24th...' Mr. Tonks began tentatively.

Harry lowered his forehead until it rested on the tabletop. 'I banished her post, didn't I?' he groaned.

'Most likely, yes,' Mr. Tonks nodded. 'Now, Andromeda's passed that along and I'm confident the young lady understands that –'

'Hermione was told that I banished her post?' Harry wailed. 'Do you know what that sounds like?'

'I daresay that Andromeda placed this bit of news in the proper context,' Mr. Tonks chuckled. When Harry's frown remained, he went on, 'I only know what Dora has told me, Harry, but I presume you feel responsible for everything that happened at the Grangers' home. You know... I'm Muggle-born, and I lived through the war with You-Know-Who –'

'He has a name,' Harry snapped.

'Yes, he does,' Mr. Tonks admitted, 'and most of my clientele would soil themselves if I said that name in their presence. Fair enough – I lived through the war with Voldemort, and a second war looks ever more likely. Your friend is at grave risk by her own merits. She is Muggle-born, possibly the most notable Muggle-born of your generation thus far. True, that's been enhanced by her association with you, but Dora tells me she's no shrinking violet. The last time around, Voldemort went hard and fast after Muggle-borns. When he couldn't get at students, he attacked their families. I know that your mother –'

Harry stiffened. 'What about her?'

'She was a very highly regarded student, very outspoken. I knew who she was, even though I had little connection to Hogwarts by that time. You've not been told...?' Mr. Tonks stopped. 'I see,' he continued quietly. 'As I think about it, I doubt that it made the Daily Prophet. Bagnold was behaving very much as Fudge is behaving now, and there were cover-ups at every turn.'

'They killed my mum's... they killed my grandparents?' Harry asked.

Mr. Tonks slowly nodded. 'I don't remember precisely when it happened, but I do recall that your mother was still a student. I only knew because Andromeda heard it from Sirius – she was still in touch with him during his school days, you see.'

The room swam before Harry's eyes, and a terrible pain seared through his head. At some level he'd always suspected that Voldemort or his Death Eaters had killed his grandparents; there was no mention of them during his years with the Dursleys. It was very different to hear the words.

'I'm sorry, Harry,' Mr. Tonks whispered. 'I was only trying to make the point that the Grangers may actually be safer by being close to you. I certainly didn't intend to... I didn't mean to be the bearer of bad tidings, truly.'

Harry couldn't toss the table aside, couldn't lay waste to the restaurant; he didn't want to hurt Mr. Tonks, and he was determined to control the hate rather than let it control him. 'It's done,' he said. 'There's nothing left, except for me to end this. I have to stop him.'

Mr. Tonks took in a sharp breath. 'Is that why you're seeking tutors? Are you seriously considering taking on... you mean to take on...?' He stopped and decidedly lowered his voice. 'You mean to take on Voldemort yourself? But that's... that's...'

'Necessary,' Harry returned flatly. 'How are you coming with my list, then?'



‘Not well at all,’ Mr. Tonks said nervously. ‘Good gracious, Harry, if I’d understood what you were contemplating... I... I don’t know that I regret the lack of progress.’

Harry fidgeted, perched on the edge of his chair. ‘What do you mean, ‘not well’?’

Mr. Tonks took a sheet of paper from his valise, and it shook in his hand. He held it at arm’s length. ‘It’s like this... the Marquis de Maupassant is actually still alive – I had no idea – but apparently rather infirm and quite ill at present... Vladimir Karensky’s whereabouts are unknown and it seems he prefers that... Julia Cather’s husband declined on her behalf... Marcus Detheridge is otherwise engaged, and sends his regrets... Bret McCrary hexed four post owls, so I gave up on her – that gets expensive, you know... my contacts think Mad-Eye Moody might know where Klaus Adenauer is, but I can’t seem to locate Moody... Kanzan Yasutsuna is involved in some sort of major project, but offered his availability next year... David Narrandarrie thought that he shouldn’t teach you before springtime – for the life of me I don’t understand why, something about tests or quests or some such... and so it goes, on and on and on. I see three categories here: unable, unwilling and busy. I’m sorry, Harry, but I’ve struck out completely for this fall.’

‘Dumbledore will be thrilled,’ Harry deadpanned.

‘If he’s aware of what you have on your mind, then I can’t say as I’d fault him,’ Mr. Tonks chided him.

“He’s probably behind it; he’s probably telling people to turn me away. He just wants control,” returned Harry, “that’s what he always wants.’

‘Why would he withdraw, then...? Ah, of course... control on his own terms.’ Mr. Tonks seemed to weigh the idea, then added, ‘It’s a concept based on observation, I’ll grant you that much.’

‘You, erm, don’t seem to like Dumbledore all that much...’ Harry ventured.

Mr. Tonks rummaged in his valise yet again. 'Dumbledore's a complicated man. He tends to bring out complicated emotions.' He let a leather binder drop to the tabletop as he continued, 'Things are rarely as they seem with him. I've known the man for nearly forty years, accounting for my school days, and all I know for certain is that I don't know him.' Two folders joined the binder. 'I respect him more than anyone I've ever met. I firmly believe he seeks to do that which is good and right.' He set a smattering of biros and pencils atop the folders. 'I also believe he's stubborn to a fault and more than a little self-righteous, considering that he was losing the war rather badly until... well, until you ended it. He'll sacrifice people to the greater good, and I've made certain Dora sees that. I've come to believe that Dumbledore loves everyone, and no one in particular.' He pulled a slim pair of spectacles from a case nestled within his suitcoat, and dangled them by one extended arm. 'He's been very near to the centre of the wizarding world since before I was born. I can't begin to imagine what goes through the man's mind, except...' He slipped on the spectacles, which promptly slid to the end of his nose. '...I'd venture that he sees something of himself in you. I don't know that, of course, but it's the impression he left with me.'

'I guess I should be glad he's coming, then,' Harry sighed. 'It looks like he's my only alternative for a teacher, for one.'

Mr. Tonks pushed up his glasses. 'He's coming, is he? When did you speak with him?'

'I didn't speak to him – we exchanged posts,' Harry answered. 'He'll be here in an hour or so.'

'I see,' said Mr. Tonks. He spoke slowly – carefully, Harry thought. 'I'm pleased to hear that, not because I want a particular outcome, but because I think you need some resolution. I also suspect that learning from Dumbledore will benefit you far beyond any current objectives that you may have.'

'What, after the war?' Harry asked. 'How do you mean?'

Mr. Tonks sighed. 'Yes, following the war. Think on this – he is Albus Dumbledore, after all... a pupil and colleague of Nicholas Flamel,

leading expert in several areas of magic, vanquisher of the last dark wizard, and as well connected as any wizard in the world.' The corners of his mouth turned up slightly. 'It's fair to assume that you'd be his last student, Harry – the last person to receive his knowledge. Now combine that knowledge with his contacts, and your own reputation and merits... surely you can see the value.'

'It's hard for me to think that far ahead,' Harry admitted.

They both fell silent for a time, while Mr. Tonks leafed through the folders atop his binder. He set a sheet of paper before Harry, covered by columns of numbers. 'This is a balance sheet, that reflects the results of the repayments,' he explained. 'Do you recall when I told you about the trustee situation with the Potter Trust? I've initiated a discussion with Fliptrask, the goblin at Gringotts in charge of these matters. He has determined that either new trustees must be appointed, or the trust must be dissolved. He was also willing to approve a one-time transfer from the trust into your personal account. I didn't expect he'd do that.'

'You were able to get the money I asked for, then? And the other things that I need?' Harry wondered.

Mr. Tonks nodded slowly. 'Fliptrask was apprehensive about the size of the exchange you requested. After Diggle's misadventures... well, they're a bit on edge. At any rate, it's not in your best interests to annoy the goblins, so we struck an agreement. His staff arranged for a secondary Gringotts account, to hold the transferred Galleons from the Potter Trust. Rather than exchange it all at once, they've linked the account to a Muggle account with Lloyds. You can use up to 10,000 pounds per day, and Gringotts will automatically cover it. It's easy for you to use, and Gringotts continues to generate fees – everyone's satisfied this way.'

'And... Fliptrask helps us get the Trust in order, because I'm doing something good for him,' Harry thought out-loud.

'You're catching on to all this. Good show, Harry,' Mr. Tonks grinned. He proceeded to give Harry a small supply of cheques and a Lloyds credit plate, and carefully explained how they were used and how

transactions should be logged and so forth. Then he proffered a large sealed envelope. 'I understand the need for the Muggle papers; in any case, Sirius set all of that in motion. He was determined that you be able to live free, as an adult, where you chose. Everything of importance is in the envelope; official copies, of course, with the originals safely put aside. We can go over it all at another time, if you like.' He hesitated. "It's... very tempting to enquire why you wanted such a large amount of Muggle money... but... I prefer to give you the benefit of the doubt. Remember, no contracts in England unless I give the authorisation.'

Harry nodded solemnly, in acknowledgement of Mr. Tonks' trust. 'Er... should we do this regularly – meet, I mean?' he asked.

'We'll have to do that, particularly as the trust arrangements are evaluated,' Mr. Tonks agreed. As binders and folders and biros and finally the glittering box rained into the valise, he cleared his throat. 'I have to ask this... er... how hard did Dora hit you, really?'

'She knocked loose a tooth,' Harry said ruefully; 'Dobby had to fix it properly.'

'That's my girl,' Mr. Tonks beamed. He stood, patted Harry on the shoulder, and added, 'Contact me if you need anything. I'll be in touch shortly.'

Harry was left alone with his water glass and his thoughts. He mulled over everything that Mr. Tonks had told him, but kept returning to the parts about Dumbledore. For once, someone hadn't simply assumed that Dumbledore had a right to teach him, to control him. Mr. Tonks was swayed by Dumbledore's abilities, and it was difficult to mount an opposing argument. Will he teach me what I need to know? Harry asked himself. He suspected Dumbledore didn't really know how to kill Voldemort, but doubted that anyone did. I'll let him teach me, then, but I won't be a prisoner, he decided, I won't let him lock me away – not anymore.

'I won't live in a cage... not like Sirius,' he murmured. Not like Sirius. Everything that everyone had said about Sirius, everything that Hermione had said about guilt, everything that Sirius had said via the

will – it all flowed back into Harry, and for the first time he knew that it was all true. Sirius did something foolhardy because he so badly wanted out of his cage; despite all the other mistakes – Dumbledore's, Snape's, his own – it really came down to that. 'I understand, Padfoot – I understand,' he added. A heaviness lifted from him, even as the loss struck him anew. He rubbed at his eyes, and blinked hard twice; the air around him had a faint shimmer to it, that was already fading.

Dumbledore was sitting quietly across from him. 'It seemed inappropriate to disturb you,' he said gently.

'I'm fine. I was just... er, hello,' Harry stammered. He reached for his serviette, but Dumbledore extended a silken handkerchief instead. 'I don't need that,' he insisted.

'There is no shame in grief, unless you choose to feel ashamed,' said Dumbledore. He let the handkerchief rest beside Harry's elbow. 'I should not have returned you to the Dursleys in June, Harry. Perhaps if I had simply done the right thing – sent you with the Weasleys, or perhaps allowed you to remain at Hogwarts – then you would have been able to properly grieve for Sirius.'

Harry's teeth clenched. 'If you hadn't locked Sirius in that... that... that house, perhaps I wouldn't have to grieve!'

Dumbledore sighed audibly. 'What would you have had me do? There were very few –'

'Send him away! One of his posts came by some sort of jungle bird – he surely wasn't in Surrey. You should have just kept him there!' Harry shot back.

'That is precisely what I did – I sent him away,' Dumbledore replied calmly. 'He returned. I sent him away again, and he once again returned. It is hard to recognise that many things take place outside of our respective vantage points.'

Harry stared in disbelief. 'You... you sent him away twice? But he never said...'

‘You undid him, Harry. He was never certain how much of himself to share, unsure whether to treat you as son or friend, torn between hovering over you and letting you fly free.’ Dumbledore smiled faintly, and added, ‘I have come to understand his dilemma, after a fashion.’

The Greek sidled up to the table, a menu lazily dangling from one hand. ‘You will order, then?’

Dumbledore smiled and said, ‘I am deeply stirred by the scents coming from the kitchen, but I have already taken the midday meal and it is too early for the evening repast.’

The Greek looked to Harry. ‘What did he say? Does he order or not?’

Harry grinned. ‘He’d like to see the afters.’

‘Could have just said that,’ The Greek grunted.

Dumbledore laughed. ‘Are you attempting to create a diversion, Harry?’ he asked. ‘If so, I commend you on your choice.’

‘No diversion – not at all!’ Harry assured him. ‘I just remembered the lemon tart, and thought you might like it.’

‘Indeed – I recall it fondly from prior meals here. In fact, I obtained the recipe,’ Dumbledore recounted. ‘Sadly, the house-elves’ best attempts fall short.’ He shook his head. ‘It is a sign of true artistry when the sum exceeds the whole of its parts. Miss Malloch is an artist.’

Dumbledore fell silent, as if content to await dessert. Harry fidgeted, looked about, fidgeted some more, and then decided to attempt conversation. ‘Er... I imagine everything is in place for the beginning of term?’

‘Hm... what was that? Oh, yes,’ Dumbledore said absently. ‘Nearly everything is in place. Returning staff are all quite busy, owing to the changes in curriculum. I’ve had to leave some elements in play. There is one staff position yet to fill, and another that remains uncertain –’

One of the servers rolled a silver service cart to the table, festooned with an array of desserts. Dumbledore stopped in mid-sentence and turned his attention to the cart. 'Ah, there is that lovely tart... oh, goodness, the mousse does look compelling... yes, a splendid diversion, indeed...' He made one selection, and then added a second at Harry's urging. Between forkfuls, he caught Harry's eye. 'Marcus Detheridge informed me that you attempted to secure his services. I was rather surprised, to say the least. In fact, I couldn't fathom how you knew of him.'

'I was trying to arrange tutors for the fall,' Harry snapped. 'Surely you knew that – I imagine that's why he turned down the offer.'

'I knew nothing of the kind,' Dumbledore returned. 'In one respect, I'm pleased to hear it. By withdrawing, I had hoped that you would either return of your own accord or be spurred on to action.'

Harry's eyes narrowed. 'No one was available, not one wizard. Quite a coincidence, isn't it?'

'You pursued several wizards, did you? That would be a wise course. Provide me with a list, and we shall see if it is in fact a coincidence,' Dumbledore challenged.

As Harry quickly rattled off the names, Dumbledore's eyebrows rose ever higher. 'Well? How many did you hire away?' he demanded.

'That is an astonishing list,' Dumbledore managed. Harry was quietly pleased to see him so obviously startled. 'Alexandre deMaupassant is... he is a remarkable man. I imagine you were unaware that Professor Flitwick studied with him at one time. I daresay Filius could tutor you in most of his techniques, but without the bluster and bravado...' The corners of his mouth twitched upward. '...though that is certainly part of Alex's appeal. As to Mister Karensky... he is dangerous, to say the least. I do understand why one might consider him – there is no one more able in his particular area of expertise – but I would require some convincing as to why he and his skills would be of use to you. Madam Cather is a brilliant spellcrafter, but rather averse to fieldwork; in fact, I believe that she may be agoraphobic.

We have corresponded but have never met. In any case, I question whether spellcrafting would best employ your abilities. Miss McCrary is someone I have considered in the past for the Defence post; however, I am fairly certain that she is not welcome in Britain at this time. I imagine that she might kill Severus on sight, as well, and this would prove rather inconvenient...'

Harry sat up straight at that. After several seconds, he still had no idea whether or not Dumbledore was joking. The Headmaster continued, 'Professor Adenauer would be a very able Potions tutor for you. You are aware, of course, that he is blind; he has managed to turn this to his advantage in very interesting ways. However, he is under contract to the United States magical government at the moment. Kanzan... you simply must meet Kanzan at some point, but he is quite often booked two to three years in advance. David Narrandarrie... yes, I would not have thought of him. His methods are considered unorthodox, as is often the case when people lack understanding. I suspect that some would call for my removal were I to offer him a regular post. Still... there might be value in learning of dreamtime...'

Dumbledore went on and on and on, and it became abundantly clear to Harry that he was acquainted with all wizards of any stature, and equally clear that he hadn't conspired to steal them away. 'That brings us to Marcus Detheridge. I have in fact offered him the Defence position for the coming year. He has not yet accepted, but I did not expect to see him again until tomorrow evening. Apparently he plans to accept, although it is not wise to make assumptions about Marcus – his time is not always his own.'

Harry lowered his eyes. 'I shouldn't have snapped at you,' he said.

Dumbledore patted his hand. 'You were seeking the services of some very powerful wizards and witches, Harry. It is not surprising that they were, by and large, otherwise engaged. On the whole, your inclinations were superlative. I must ask, who assisted you with the creation of this list?'

Harry frowned. 'Well... you can ask.'



'I see. I fear I shall have to add to the ranks of those who disregarded my request that you be left alone,' Dumbledore said, and his eyes gave off the familiar twinkle that Harry found just a bit grating.

'Did you just break into my mind?' Harry asked indignantly.

'Not at all. You hesitated to respond, which told me that a member of our, ahem, circle of friends was involved. I know that Bill Weasley has at least attempted to make contact with you. Miss Tonks is clearly unhappy with me. I wouldn't be at all surprised if the young Messrs. Weasley had sought you out –'

'What, Fred and George? No, they haven't,' Harry said honestly.

Dumbledore raised a hand. 'It is of no matter. None of those could have spawned your list, not in its entirety. Alastor could have done so, but he is away at present. Severus could have been responsible, but I cannot imagine that this is so. That would leave... Kingsley Shacklebolt, perhaps?' His maddening twinkle grew brighter. 'Your eyes betray you, Harry. Most would not have seen them flicker – perhaps not even Voldemort – but I have observed you rather closely for some time.'

Harry crossed his arms and pounced. 'He was doing what he thought was right.'

'Of that, I have no doubt,' Dumbledore smiled. 'Did he explain himself, offer justification for why he returned?'

'He just showed up for the lesson, as we'd planned,' Harry shrugged. 'At first I figured that you'd sent him.'

'Certainly not,' Dumbledore assured him. 'I truly intended that you be left alone, in keeping with your stated desire.' His smile returned. 'Does this mean that you have reached a rapprochement with Kingsley?'

Harry stared at Dumbledore blankly. 'Sorry... a what?'

‘An understanding, Harry – I assume that you’ve reached an understanding,’ explained Dumbledore. ‘I realise that Kingsley began his engagement under duress.’

‘Well, he didn’t want to teach me, that’s for sure,’ agreed Harry. ‘We’re getting on now, more or less. Last summer, I didn’t know he was so... er...’

‘Unyielding? Difficult? Demanding?’ Dumbledore offered.

Harry grinned sheepishly. ‘Sure, all of those.’

Dumbledore frowned, but it failed to reach his eyes. ‘He thinks highly of you. If he did not, then he would never have overcome the anger from losing his post, and he certainly would not have disregarded my request.’

‘Request... it wasn’t an order that everyone stay away, then?’ Harry asked.

‘I rarely give orders,’ answered Dumbledore. ‘Orders often excuse their recipients of both responsibility and creativity. It was a request, and nothing more.’

‘People take your requests seriously,’ Harry observed.

Dumbledore grew quiet. ‘That is something hard-earned,’ he said after a time.

‘I suppose they’ll all come back, if you change your mind?’ Harry ventured.

‘Some already have, as you well know. Others have acceded, but begrudgingly – they disagreed, but did not wish to publicly challenge my position.’ Dumbledore took another forkful of the tart. ‘Molly Weasley puts more of herself into a Howler than any witch I have ever known,’ he added casually.

Harry winced. ‘I’ve heard one of her Howlers before. What was she on about, exactly?’

'My addled brain, amongst other subjects,' laughed Dumbledore. 'She was extraordinarily perturbed over the idea of leaving you alone in St. Ebb, atop what has been a very difficult summer for her. My ears were positively ringing.'

'I, erm, suppose that I should be sorry,' Harry offered.

'Yet you are not, nor should you be,' Dumbledore quickly returned. 'I have explained to you my errors from last year, and have accepted responsibility with regard to Sirius' death. However, I expected you to accept both my explanation and my regrets in a single sitting, as though you would simply move on without worries or grief. That was an unreasonable expectation on my part.'

'I've done all right,' Harry said firmly.

Dumbledore looked deeply into his eyes. 'Have you really?' Harry quickly turned away, and Dumbledore's expression dimmed. 'Would it have been easier or preferable to cope with your loss in the company of friends? I returned you to the Dursleys' home; you surely would have chosen elsewhere.'

'If it would have kept Hermione safe, or helped Ron get better, or protected the Burrow, I would have stayed there until the first of September,' insisted Harry.

'It would have made no difference,' Dumbledore told him. 'Miss Granger and her family were targets, on account of the events at the Ministry as well as her heritage. The Weasley family represents an obvious target for Death Eater activity, nearly as obvious as yourself. The value of the blood protection at Privet Drive may have waned on its own; it is unlikely that you considered it your home, and your aunt's participation in the protection was never whole-hearted.'

'So you're saying you should have left me with the Weasleys?' Harry asked. 'Is that it?'

Dumbledore toyed with his dessert fork, before he set it down on his empty plate. 'I am saying that you should have stayed with me,' he said quietly.

'You don't mean that,' Harry blurted out.

'I meant precisely what I said,' insisted Dumbledore. 'Had I foreseen the events of this summer, or honestly considered your status with regard to the Dursleys in its full dimension, I would have kept you at Hogwarts in my company...'

The raw emotion in the Headmaster's eyes was almost painful for Harry to see – it was as though he could feel it. He debated a dozen different things to say, but couldn't seem to get any of them to leave his mouth.

Dumbledore sighed heavily, and then asked, 'What must I do to convince you to join me as an apprentice – to serve as a member of the Hogwarts staff?'

I would have done anything for that, a year ago – anything, Harry knew. But now... He shrugged. 'I have nowhere else to go.'

'I would prefer that you did not back into this role, but I will accept your reasoning and aspire to change it,' Dumbledore said.

'Where do I sign, then?' Harry asked heavily.

'Sign? There is nothing to sign,' returned Dumbledore.

'I found a book, in the tower. It was about apprenticeships, and –' Harry began.

Dumbledore gently stopped him. 'This is not the nineteenth century, Harry. I have no need of a servant, no desire to punish, and no ego with regard to our relationship. We will shake hands – that is enough. I will only ask three things of you.'

Here it comes, Harry thought. 'All right,' he said apprehensively.

Dumbledore folded his hands together. 'First, I ask that you commit yourself to finding a means of self-control. I do not mean that you should push your emotions aside or deeply suppress them – rather, that you learn how to deal with them constructively. This is very important, and your magic will benefit as a result.'

Harry didn't have an argument to offer; what Dumbledore asked made sense to him, even if it felt out of reach. 'I'll try,' he offered.

Dumbledore nodded. 'Second, I ask you to keep me informed. I will not approve of all your actions, but it is not necessary that I do so. You are deemed an adult now and our relationship should be conducted as such. In return, I will seek to keep you better informed of events that affect you. We will take important steps to this end very soon.'

'I don't want to share everything with you,' Harry said firmly

'I ask you to keep me informed,' Dumbledore repeated. 'I do not want a detailed recounting of each day. I am certainly interested in your major decisions; they will help me better understand you. I am very interested in your safety – because I care about your well-being, not because of what you represent.'

'I... can't be sure you'll always know everything you'd like to know,' Harry responded carefully.

Dumbledore smiled. 'That is true. I do not seek to be your parent, Harry, and I will not act as such. To reduce any temptation to that end, we will not practice Occlumency or Legilimency together – nor will you practice with Professor Snape. Keeping me informed is simply something I am asking of you. If you agree, then your actions rest upon your own conscience and upon the lives of those whom your decisions may affect.'

'I'll share anything that has to do with my learning, or anything you assign for me to do, or anything relating to Hogwarts,' Harry promised.

Dumbledore looked at him curiously. 'That is most cautious of you,' he said. Third, I ask you to promise that on a single occasion of my

choosing – and only the one occasion – you will do precisely as I request, without question.'

Harry stiffened. 'Excuse me?'

'I knew that this request would not sit well with you,' Dumbledore admitted. 'I have my reasons for this, and it is something that I have asked of every apprentice who has ever chosen to work at my direction.'

Harry's breathing quickened. He felt a creeping sense of dread work its way up from his feet into his stomach. 'I... I can't do that.'

Dumbledore's eyebrows arched. 'Harry... it would be best if you were to take a long, slow breath.'

Harry's hands fluttered. 'I can't... I know what you'll do. If you'd been at the Grangers', you... you would have asked me to sit there. I would have had to just sit there, and... and I can't do that.'

'A long, slow breath, Harry – please. You'll find it most helpful,' Dumbledore said calmly. 'I would never ask you to stand by and allow one of your friends to be killed, even if it were the wisest course of action. You would be unable to comply, and I know this. I will swear an oath to that effect, if you wish.'

Harry reeled, barely able to take any kind of breath at all. He stammered, 'An oath... you... no, I won't ask you to... I... you'd really do that?'

'If it is required to secure your trust, yes,' Dumbledore told him.

Harry took in a deep, rasping lungful of air, and let it out very slowly. His hands settled, and the dread descended. Why do you have to be right, Dumbledore? I don't want you to be right! he raged inside. 'You really wouldn't...?' he started.

'Absolutely not,' Dumbledore insisted. 'If there is a price to be paid for the invocation of my request, it will be paid by me, and not by you or your friends.'

'I accept,' Harry blurted out before he could second-guess himself, and thrust forward his hand.

Dumbledore grasped his hand, and shook it firmly. There was no brilliant glow, no odd tingle, no feeling of dread or euphoria, no sense of anything magical – Harry only sensed the sweat coating his palm and a powerful sense of apprehension.

The rest was rather mundane – mostly Dumbledore ploughing through a series of dates and details. They didn't agree on where Harry would live, so Harry pressed until it was understood that he would take up rooms in Hogsmeade pending a firmer agreement. He tried to conceal his satisfaction with the outcome – it didn't matter much to him where they settled upon, provided that it was off the Hogwarts grounds. He would report to Hogwarts on the morning of the 31st, which left him two full days to make arrangements.

He took his own dessert when the cart came past again, and ate it very slowly. His last appointment of the day was the one he'd awaited the most. I get to have a life, he shouted inside, and I don't care what the sodding prophecy says. Dumbledore won't let me have a life, no matter what he says. He didn't even want to let me off the grounds; I had to push him.

The Greek ambled toward his table, and Harry steeled himself – surely that meant his contact had arrived or was on the way. He watched and waited. The Greek was alone, and he began to worry that perhaps the meeting had fallen through. Everything Harry planned to do was based on two significant articles of faith – that Heather's intentions hadn't changed since she'd shoved the note in his hand at the club, and more importantly, that Heather's contact could be trusted.

The Greek abruptly sat down. 'Your meetings, they go well,' he declared.

'Well enough,' Harry agreed.

‘You might want to do your, ehh, silence? Some things, better they’re quiet,’ The Greek murmured.

Harry sat bolt upright. ‘Do my... huh?’ His fingertips closed around his wand, beneath the tabletop.

‘I know what you are, I know who you are. Our, ehh, mutual friend... she does not know these things?’ asked The Greek. ‘My daughter, she talk to you on the telephone – this is the arrangement that, ehh, was made for you.’

‘That was your daughter? I thought she was... but Heather... my meeting is with you?’ Harry stammered.

‘Silence, do your silence,’ muttered The Greek.

Harry recovered himself enough to manage a silent space and a mild Confundus charm around the table. ‘How is Heather? Have you spoken with her?’ he asked rapidly.

The Greek held up one hand. ‘She talks with my daughter every day. I am just, ehh, middle man... but... there are things I can do for you that Heather, ehh, cannot know.’

Harry raised his arm just enough to expose an inch or two of his wand. ‘You know about me,’ he confirmed. ‘You’re one of us, then?’

‘No, no... no wizard,’ The Greek chuckled. ‘Not Greek, even – is just a name someone gave me when we first come to London. I am, ehh, what you call... squib.’

Harry kept his wand very consciously levelled at the man. ‘You have two minutes to convince me I shouldn’t use a memory charm and get out of here.’ He was inwardly pleased that his voice didn’t crack or waver.

‘My family was, how you say, displaced during the war,’ The Greek began. ‘We flee from Albania, end up in Greece, then Cyprus, then Egypt, then Spain. I get work there, find out later that boss knows I’m squib. Big company, so they move us to Paris, then to London. Man



from the company arranges for me to come here, guess they have trouble finding right person... you know Preston?’

‘I know him,’ Harry said. He raised his wand above the tabletop. ‘Albania, you said? I haven’t had such good luck with Albania.’

‘Not many have good luck with Albania,’ The Greek said darkly. ‘Bad for wizards, worse for Muggles. One direction, werewolves and vampyres. Other direction, the Communists.’ His thick accent crushed ‘v’s into ‘w’s. Harry noticed that he snarled out the dark creatures, but positively spat out the government.

‘When did you leave?’ Harry demanded.

‘Seventeen years ago,’ The Greek returned. ‘Across the border in dead of night... my wife, two sons, and daughter.’

‘If you’re a squib, why didn’t your family get you out?’ Harry shot back.

The Greek’s face flushed. ‘You know what it is to be squib. There is your answer.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Harry offered.

The Greek sneered, ‘It is no matter, for none of them survived. They were great hunters, ehh, in long tradition of the region. Those years... not good years for dark hunters.’

Harry watched the man’s growing unease, and changed the subject. ‘What are you supposed to do, then? What did Heather ask for?’

‘Heather ask my daughter to arrange for portable computer and phone, and daughter call me,’ The Greek replied. ‘Good thing, because you make the mobile phone go crazy. I call Preston, he set me up with people in London. I give you number and address for his people, and I give you number and the E-mail for Heather.’ He took out a scrap of paper and set it atop the table.

‘Why?’ Harry asked pointedly. ‘You know who I am, so you know what happens around me –’

‘Feh... everyone is target now,’ The Greek shrugged. ‘She like you. I do this for you, I make her happy and I make daughter happy. This makes wife happy, which makes me happy.’

Harry grinned. ‘Thank you,’ he said earnestly.

The Greek turned very serious; he clenched and unclenched his fists. ‘You keep her away from the dark ones, eh? She is hurt, and you will pay.’

‘I’ll do everything I can manage, but I can’t promise...’ Harry returned.

The Greek planted his hand protectively atop the paper. ‘You will swear.’

Harry began to protest. ‘I can’t –’

‘You – will – swear. Heather give me job, find job for daughter. She is good girl...’ The Greek settled back into his chair a bit, his expression less menacing. ‘Sad girl... lonely girl. My daughter, she likes Heather very much, like sister. I do anything for family – family is everything.’

‘My family is gone,’ Harry said quietly. He looked into The Greek’s eyes, found something there that he could trust, and added firmly, ‘I swear it.’

The Greek extended a hand, and enveloped Harry in a bone-crushing handshake. When he let go, he sat back and crossed his arms. ‘Heather, she is not blood but she is family. You have family, Harry Potter; everyone has family.’ He nodded at the scrap of paper, and Harry swept it up gratefully.

‘Now I ask something of you,’ The Greek muttered.

Harry’s brow furrowed, and he waited to see what sort of shoe dropped. ‘Erm... go on...’

The Greek shifted uneasily in his chair. ‘The man Shona brings around – you know this man.’ It was a statement, not a question.

‘Yes,’ Harry admitted.

‘He is not, what you say... Muggle,’ The Greek reported. His upper lip curled. ‘He is dark creature, I think.’

Harry willed himself to remain calm, even as he scrambled for a response. ‘I know him well. He’s a former professor of mine, from Hogwarts. You know about Hogwarts, right?’

‘Of course I hear of Hogwarts – I am not stupid,’ snapped The Greek. ‘He is wizard, then... hmm. He is teacher no more, eh?’ His eyes narrowed. ‘Why?’

Harry spoke slowly, carefully. ‘He was the professor for Defence Against the Dark Arts, but we have a different professor for Defence every year. He... he was a friend of my father and mother.’

The Greek seemed to search Harry’s face for something, and at last said, ‘He is family, then. You trust this man?’

Harry hesitated. He was trying to be truthful without revealing anything that he didn’t think The Greek should know, and it felt like every road with Lupin lead back to Heather. He settled on, ‘I’ve trusted him with my life.’

‘The dark is on him...’ The Greek murmured.

Harry raised his wand slightly, enough to be noticed. ‘But you said you’re a squib. How...?’

‘Not everything about being dark hunter comes from sticks,’ The Greek snarled, his big hand pointing squarely at the wand. ‘Even worthless squib sees the dark, smells the dark.’ He calmed again, and lowered his hand. ‘You say this man, he teach defences? He flirts with dark, then – this must be the smell.’

Harry nodded vigorously. He was angry with Lupin, furious even, but had no desire to endanger him. ‘He’s spent a lot of time around Dementors and –’

The Greek recoiled, and spat a string of something unintelligible. 'Horrible things, terrible. We speak no more of this. You trust this man, I trust you – is enough for now.' He formed his thumb and forefinger into the shape of a Muggle handgun, and added coldly, 'The sticks, they do much, but they don't stop a gun. If he hurts Shona, a bullet for him... silver, to be safe.'

'He won't hurt her,' Harry said, and hoped that he was telling the truth.

The Greek barely nodded. 'I will be watching,' he said slowly.

Harry looked to the scrap of paper in his hand. 'Thank you for this.'

'Go,' The Greek said. 'Get your mobile phone and your E-mail.' He shook his head, and added derisively, 'Children and their toys... it is beyond me.' He stood up to leave and seemed to bump squarely into something that wasn't there. 'What is this?'

'Oh! Er, sorry,' Harry said quickly. 'I was just being sure that... never mind.'

The Greek smiled at him strangely, fiercely. 'I read papers, now and then. The Dark One, he will come for you, yes? It is good you are powerful wizard.' He leaned over toward Harry. 'I ran from them, the last time. No running now. I stand and fight.' He straightened himself, and added, 'You be careful.'

Harry nodded – he understood that The Greek was referring to Heather more than him – and let the silent space fall away. He couldn't imagine what the man would be able to do in terms of putting up a fight, if it ever came to that – The Greek knew Dementors were awful things, but could he even see them? Does he really have guns? Harry wondered. He looked at the scrap of paper, and considered once more the implications of doing as Heather had suggested in her note – of fashioning a secret life, one that had room for her in it. When his water glass was again emptied, he quietly slipped out the door.

## Chapter Twenty-nine

### BRING ME THE HEAD OF AUNTIE AGONY

August 29, 1996

Harry reduced his sixth sheet of parchment to confetti, and tossed it into the air. A few bits fell gently into the bin beside the desk, where the previous five sheets lay crumpled. He incinerated the rest, one tiny piece at a time.

“Mister Potter, is it your intention to slowly deplete the world’s supply of parchment?” Phineas Nigellus sneered from his place upon the wall.

“I’m trying to write a post, thank you very much,” Harry snapped without looking up from his latest attempt.

“Organize your thoughts, prepare a brief outline, and then write the post,” the portrait proclaimed. “This is hardly difficult work, Mister Potter; you are old enough that the requisite skills should lay within your grasp. For what purpose do you write, then – the extension of credit, the collection of debt, or the general discharge of responsibilities?”

“The... what?” Harry asked absently. “It’s just a post to a friend.”

The portrait sharply arched an eyebrow. “You waste parchment on simple posts? That is the purpose of paper. Parchment is for contracts, Mister Potter; parchment is for the conveyance of orders. It is for the keeping of official records, and it is for the casting of runes. It is not for the passing of schoolboy notes, nor is it for simple correspondence!”

“But... everyone uses parchment for posts,” Harry returned. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen a wizard use paper for anything... well, some of us who live with Muggles use it. Er, does Dumbledore use paper?”

“Headmaster Dumbledore rarely, if ever, writes anything unofficial,” Phineas Nigellus sniffed. “I shall have to speak to him of this foolishness... parchment for simple posts, indeed! The only sort of personal posts for which parchment is suitable are those involving matters of the heart...” The portrait stopped abruptly and its eyes narrowed. “Mister Potter, you’re not trying to write that sort of post, are you?”

Harry whirled about. “I said it was a post to a friend! Hermione sent me a post, and I banished it with the rest of them, and she probably thinks that either I hate her or I’ve gone stark raving. I just want... she needs to know I’m sorry, that’s all.”

Phineas Nigellus tapped his chin with one finger, and pursed his lips. “Hermione... Hermione... Ah, that would be Miss, eh, Grantham? No... Grolier? No, that isn’t... Granger? Yes, of course, Miss Granger – Professor McGonagall’s favourite. One of your regular partners in mischief, is she not?”

“That’s right,” Harry sighed.

The portrait peered down his nose at Harry. “I am relieved to know that you only see Miss Granger as a friend and accomplice. Professor McGonagall speaks highly of the young lady’s intellectual prowess, as does the Headmaster, but a man of your station must always maintain a strategic eye when considering relationships and the inevitable entanglement of marriage.”

Harry’s hand twitched and he nearly toppled the bottle of ink with his quill. “M-marriage? Who said anything about marriage?”

“Always keep the difference between romance and marriage firmly fixed in your mind, Mister Potter,” Phineas Nigellus exhorted.

“Pardon?” Harry muttered.

“Your eventual marriage must advance the fortunes and position of your House – tradition demands it,” the portrait droned on. “This limits your alternatives, of course, but any desires you might harbour for

romance or other needs can be satisfied via other avenues, as may be required.”

“Other... avenues....” Harry stopped to take in fully what the portrait was saying, and then spluttered, “Are you telling me... sweet Merlin, are you telling me I should... should shag on the side?” His face exploded in crimson. “Is that what you mean? I’m supposed to marry someone I don’t like, and then cheat?”

Phineas Nigellus shrugged his shoulders casually. “That is the way of things.”

“The way of things?” Harry shouted. His seventh sheet of parchment burst into flames.

The portrait droned on as though nothing had happened, even as Harry moved to contain the fire. “The young lady is likely to be named Head Girl in her final year; which surely comes as no surprise to you. As such, she will become an acceptable bride for a lower-born personage of noble blood – someone of a family willing to entertain the prospect of relations with a Muggle-born, of course.” The portrait’s jaw tightened and its lips curled. “Given that you are of mixed descent, she would have been a suitable partner for you. However, due to Sirius’ *fait d’accompli*, you must marry as though you belong in your present station.”

“I’m going to pretend you never said that, Phineas,” Harry growled.

“You are the scion of a Noble House... two Noble Houses, in fact, although both lie in tatters. You simply cannot indulge in a public liaison with anyone considered unmarriageable – you no longer have that luxury,” the portrait sneered. “The Daughters of the Goblin Wars maintained a debutante registry in my day; you would do well to obtain their list, as soon as possible.”

Harry crumpled up an eighth sheet of parchment, doused it in ink, and threw it squarely at the portrait. He ignored the string of invective that followed, and set about cleaning his quill and sealing up the remaining ink. “If I need this sort of advice, I’ll take it from someone

who hasn't been dead for a hundred years," he fumed. "I'm writing the bloody post elsewhere!"

Phineas Nigellus made a futile attempt to wipe at the smear of ink. "I am only looking after the best interests of my House," he insisted. "Your personal interests are of little concern to me; if you were not Master of this House, you could court a lonely hippogriff and I would give my blessing."

Harry flung the door open. "There's a dark wizard trying to kill me and everyone I've ever cared about, and I'm supposed to worry about marriage prospects? This is unbelievable."

Phineas Nigellus shook his head balefully and strolled out of view, but not before calling out, "Dark wizards come and go, but tradition remains."

As Harry stepped into the corridor, Dobby nearly toppled him. "Harry Potter, sir, Mister Shackbolt will be an hour later than planned," the house-elf said with obvious distaste.

"Perfect," Harry said gamely. "Perhaps I'll manage to finish this post."

Dobby peeked around Harry into the study, and then broke into a toothy grin. "What happened to the portrait of Headmaster Nigellus, Harry Potter? Such a terrible stain! Dobby is happy to remove the stain."

Phineas Nigellus abruptly returned to his frame. "You will not allow that deranged creature to gaze upon my portrait, let alone come in any sort of contact!" he shrieked, and shook his pointed finger vigorously. "I would far prefer to see the world through a permanent haze of India black, than to entrust my existence to... to... to that!"

"Dobby knows how to clean the portraits," the house-elf insisted, even as his grin widened and revealed more teeth. "Dobby would never use an excess of turpentine, and Dobby would never apply the cleansing paste with a stiff brush."



“This once, I agree with the toe-rag.” The portrait fixed both Harry and Dobby with a glare that could have stripped paint. “Never,” he added in a low, dangerous voice.

Harry shrugged. “Suit yourself,” he said lazily and closed the door. Dobby skipped down the spiral steps ahead of Harry; he whistled a bizarre tune that Harry figured for something from the Wizarding Wireless.

Upon entering the great hall, Harry set his remaining parchment, quill and ink down on the repaired dining table. “You enjoyed that, didn’t you?” he asked incredulously.

Dobby lowered his head, but snapped, “It insults Dobby, Harry Potter – it insults Dobby at every turn. It reminds Dobby of... of...” The house-elf raised his hand toward his ear, as if to pull at it, then stopped and sighed. “It reminds Dobby of those who he once served,” he concluded.

“Leave the study aside, Dobby. I’ll clean up after myself,” Harry offered.

“The ceiling is very high and the air is still, Harry Potter, sir,” Dobby observed. “That room is prone to dust and grime... and many things need a good scrubbing in the study, Harry Potter, many things.”

“I’ve never seen you like this before,” Harry said. “Wizards have treated you far worse – not that anyone should ever do that, of course. Why is it...?”

“Even bound house-elves will not shrink back from portraits, Harry Potter,” Dobby sniffed. “They is just paint, they is not real wizards – though Dobby sees many with a wizard’s tongue, even at Hogwarts. A house-elf, he can not destroy portraits – he would have to punish his-self – but... there are other ways.” The house-elf looked up and his wicked grin returned.

“Dobby! Are you a prankster?” Harry chuckled.

“Madam Pickering’s portrait, in Ravenclaw House, it would screech at all the house-elves. Madam Pickering, she was a proper witch, Dobby thinks; the portrait would say terrible things to the students if they nuzzle in the commons. Even the Head Elf – the Johtaja hisself – he would hiss at Madam Pickering. The elves...” Dobby failed to stifle a high-pitched giggle and then went on, “...they take Madam Pickering, they silence it, and they hang it in a broom closet for the year.”

Harry’s jaw dropped. “Er... which broom closet?”

“A broom closet with much comings and goings, Harry Potter!” Dobby squealed, and then quite literally rolled on the floor in hysterics.

Harry laughed and shook his head. “Remind me to stay on your good side!”

The house-elf quickly sobered and hopped to his feet. “Harry Potter is always on Dobby’s good side... even when he forgot his socks and... and he killed the dark wizards and saved Miss Granger. Even when Harry Potter forgot his socks, he was still a good and great wizard.”

“What is it with the socks, Dobby?” Harry asked. “I want to know – I really do.”

Dobby’s big eyes grew even wider. “Harry Potter does not know about house-elf’s socks? This is not something that the great Harry Potter has been told?”

“Add it to the list,” Harry fumed. “What about the socks, then?”

The house-elf flitted around the room with surprising speed, looking out every window and through every door and under every piece of furniture, before he stopped directly in front of Harry. “House-elf’s socks are ancient magic, Harry Potter, sir,” he whispered. “The magic is in the making – this is what one house-elf tells another since the beginning. When socks are freely made and freely given, house-elf’s socks protect.”

Harry found himself looking around nervously, despite his best efforts. “Protect... against what?” he asked quietly.

“Protect against the dark, Harry Potter,” Dobby whispered in return. “Headmaster Dumbledore has many, many socks. Harry Potter has socks from Dobby, but not so many.” He sighed. “Dobby does not know if Dobby’s socks still protect, now that Dobby is free.”

“That’s why you always wanted me to wear socks,” Harry breathed. “You were protecting me.”

“Dobby would do anything to protect Harry Potter,” the house-elf squeaked firmly. “The house-elves, they know what Harry Potter is. Even if Dobby’s socks do not protect, Harry Potter will have proper socks – many, many socks.”

“Thank you, Dobby,” Harry said. “That really does mean quite a lot to me.”

Dobby clapped his hands. “Does Harry Potter need anything for writing of his post?”

Harry’s eyes opened wide. “The post... I, er, yes... need to finish that up. I think I’m ready now.” He sat at the end of the long table, opened his inkbottle, carefully dipped his quill, and faced another blank sheet.

“Dobby wonders if Harry Potter is writing a very, very important post?” the house-elf asked in a loud whisper.

The quill came to a stop less than an inch above the pristine parchment. “Yes, it’s important,” Harry grunted. “Do you mind?”

“Dobby will fetch a beverage and fruit, as it appears Harry Potter will be writing until Mister Shacklebolt comes,” Dobby offered, and scampered off toward the kitchen.

Harry groaned, and dripped blobs of ink on the ninth sheet of parchment. Soon, it was a paper aeroplane, soaring amidst the rafters. He grimaced at the diminishing stack, and snatched up another sheet.

Dear Hermione,

He lifted the quill, and frowned at the parchment. Wrong, he thought. It looked like the sort of greeting for a post from someone pretending to know someone else, he decided. The parchment easily crumpled in his hands, replaced by a clean sheet.

Dearest Hermione,

Harry stopped again. That greeting conjured up images of one of Aunt Petunia's ghastly romances on the telly; the ones that had tempted him to ask to go into the cupboard on occasion. Some half-dressed ponce would spout poetry and sweep up the fair maiden, and... "Gah," Harry grunted, and another sheet of parchment met a violent end.

Hermione,

Harry held back the quill, and looked at the word for a moment. Direct... to the point... good enough, he decided.

How are you?

"Oh, that's just daft!" he shouted, and shredded the parchment.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hello, Potter," Shacklebolt boomed. "The elf says you're having trouble writing a post." He looked to the mounting pile of parchment balls at Harry's feet, and smirked. "I see the elf was correct."

Harry tossed down his quill. "Thank Merlin! You're here at last."

Shacklebolt shook his head. "Harry Potter... only known survivor of the Killing Curse, as well as multiple confrontations with the Dark Lord Voldemort... hero to the wizarding world... is undone by a simple post." His smirk deepened. "You must be writing to a young lady."

“Does that mean we’ve started?” Harry snorted, as he sealed up his inkbottle. “It won’t work, by the way, trying to rattle me like that. I’m onto your game.”

“Your face gives you away – unmistakeably Gryffindor red,” Shacklebolt mocked.

Harry stood lightly, and unholstered his wand. “You’ll find I did my reading last night,” he warned.

“I wonder who it could be? Surely not the young Weasley chit? The whole of Britain knows you’re finished with her,” Shacklebolt said casually. He moved into an easy stance, but Harry knew better.

“Nice try, Kingsley,” Harry shot back, “and she was the one finished with me.”

“Do tell? I shall have to tell Molly that there’s still hope,” Shacklebolt said. Harry froze for an instant, and narrowly avoided a conjunctivitis curse.

“Not bothering to clear the furniture today, then?” Harry grunted.

“It’ll leave the elf some work,” Shacklebolt sneered. “Lovegood’s daughter, perhaps? I heard that the two of you were becoming fast friends. How fast was it, I wonder?”

Harry conjured ropes to wrap around his trainer, bull-rushed him, and seized his wand as he summoned any additional wands that may have been hidden. Instead of wands, however, two wicked-looking daggers raced toward him until he cancelled the summoning. In the process, he fell backward over the table and lost hold of Shacklebolt’s wand.

“How did you do that?” Harry panted.

“Falsified wand signatures,” Shacklebolt returned, his wand firmly in his grasp. “It’s counter-intuitive; after all, you generally want to hide a wand. Of course, when you know your opponent has developed a penchant for emptying pockets...”

“Charming,” Harry deadpanned. He set five chairs in rapid motion, which drew Shacklebolt’s attention just long enough to provide a diversion.

Shacklebolt deftly stepped backward. “I told you never to converge objects toward an opponent’s present position, Potter. They’re too easy to dodge –” He stopped in mid-sentence as one of the chandeliers landed atop his head.

“Oh, really?” Harry smirked.

“You... like dropping thu... things on my... head... don’t you?” Shacklebolt managed.

Harry cast one of the field healing charms that Shacklebolt had taught him. “Only because you leave yourself open for that... and because it’s a big, shiny target,” he mocked.

Shacklebolt grunted. He conjured a mirror, and glanced at the crown of his head. “Not bad, Potter. Not bad at all.” He waved his hand, and the mirror disappeared from it. “Risky strategy, though. If I’d moved forward, you’d have missed and I would have had a clear shot.”

Harry grinned, and muttered, “Now.” One by one, the five remaining chandeliers fell to the floor.

“I see. No wand work was required, then. You set up the room in advance – devious of you,” Shacklebolt said. After a few moments, his calculated scowl broke into a satisfied smile. “We’ll make something of you yet, assuming that you avoid excessive distraction. So... it’s neither Weasley nor Lovegood, eh?”

Harry frowned. “You’re not going to let up, are you?” He extended a hand to Shacklebolt.

“Hmm... no,” Shacklebolt chuckled, as he clambered to his feet. He looked at Harry carefully, and his eyes began to narrow. “It wouldn’t be Lupin’s daughter, would it? Harry... don’t. That would be a profoundly bad idea. It’s not just that you’d have your head turned

away – seriously, I am willing to live with a certain amount of that, with you being sixteen and all. It's that you'd have to pay attention to the girl, protect the girl, hide it all from the father, and lie to the entire Order."

Harry bristled. "Where do you get off –?"

Shacklebolt cut him off. "Yes, yes, I know you wouldn't give a tinker's damn about lying to the Order because Dumbledore lied to you first, and so on, and so on, and so on. You need allies, Potter, and the Order is the only hand you've been dealt. Get over it. Lying could get my friends killed; in fact, it could get you killed. Now, you aren't really so foolish as to be writing to that girl...?"

Harry glared fiercely, partly in anger and partly in hopes of masking his shock. His mind raced, before he spat, "Yes, of course, I'm writing Heather a post on parchment with a quill, to be delivered by owl!"

Shacklebolt raised his hands defensively. "All right, all right! I felt the need to ask; there was something about the look on your face..."

Harry was still breathing fast. "You just wait!" he fumed. "You just wait until I do a bit of research on you – then we'll see if you think that baiting me is so fun."

Shacklebolt laughed. "You're going to do research? Your school reputation precedes you, Potter. I know for a fact that Granger does all the research; you and the Weasley boy are just along for the ride... hold on there..." His smirk returned. "It's a post to Granger, isn't it?"

"So what?" Harry shot back. "I'm trying to write a post to a friend – what's the fuss? I managed to banish a post she sent to me, like a bloody fool, and I want her to know that I didn't mean it. See? That's not even very interesting!"

"The elf doesn't see it that way – he's ready to marry you off to Granger, I think. You might want to speak up before flowers are ordered," Shacklebolt taunted him.

“Dobby takes everything to an extreme,” Harry sighed. “He likes Hermione, and I agree with him on that.”

“If it’s just a post to a friend, then why are you having such a time of it?” asked Shacklebolt.

Harry felt his stomach sinking, and he couldn’t seem to stop it. “You were there,” he said quietly. “You saw everything. There’s your answer.”

Shacklebolt summoned two chairs, and motioned for Harry to sit. “It’s just as raw as the day it happened, isn’t it?”

Harry leaned forward, elbows on knees and chin on hands. “I can’t shake it off,” he whispered.

“Do you dream about it?” Shacklebolt asked.

“Not... exactly,” Harry allowed. “I’m accustomed to bad dreams.”

“I know of the connection through the scar,” Shacklebolt confided. “Has he been in your head recently?”

“Not since... everything happened... no,” Harry stammered.

Shacklebolt dabbed sweat from his brow. “Harry, I didn’t see everything. We arrived seconds before you broke free. I was focused on coming up with some sort of rescue solution, and I imagine there’s quite a lot that escaped me. At minimum, I saw things very differently than you did. I’ll be honest: what you did was more than a little frightening.” Harry sat up stiffly, and Shacklebolt put his hand on Harry’s arm. “It wasn’t the violence – I think most of us would have gladly killed every last one of them. It was the power, Harry... it was the sheer power.”

Harry’s posture relaxed, but he tensed even more inside. “The power?”

Shacklebolt roughly patted Harry’s arm, and then sat back heavily in his chair. “I’ve debated about what to say and what not to say,



regarding that day. I was impressed, I was bewildered, and yes, I was frightened. Hogwarts students don't do that sort of thing. Fully qualified wizards don't, either. A Hit Wizard might come closest to pulling off something like that, but certainly not without a wand. You crossed a room instantly, by passing through several powerful wards. You threw Pettigrew the length of the dining table. You tore men to ribbons with your bare hands. It took three of us to pick the one out of the wall –"

"I was there," Harry said quietly; "You don't need to repeat it all."

"Early on, I told you that you fight fear with knowledge. Do you recall that?" When Harry nodded despite obvious reluctance, Shacklebolt pressed on. "It's time that we review the events of that day. I'll borrow a pensieve from Dumbledore if I must."

"I can't forget that... I don't want to forget," Harry blurted out. "I don't!"

"You won't, not unless that's your intention. Pensieves copy a memory or an experience in exacting detail, usually far sharper detail than conscious awareness allows, but the original memory ordinarily remains intact," explained Shacklebolt.

"I don't want to... I don't want to do this," Harry insisted.

"If you were an Auror under my charge, I'd have arranged for some assistance long ago, and I'd require this," Shacklebolt fired back. "It's been more than three weeks, and it's still raw. If you're not having nightmares yet, then you soon will be. Trust me... I know a bit about how this works. Own it now – analyze it, understand it, and share the burden. That's what an Auror does. All this about lone heroes... stuff and nonsense. If you carry this burden as you're carrying it now, you'll break before long."

Harry tried to take in a breath, and it came in heaves. He sat on his hands, so that they wouldn't shake. "Don't make me," he said.

"I can't make you do anything," Shacklebolt admitted. "You're too headstrong for that. I'm asking you to do this. What happened... it's not something you'll ever be rid of, but you can set it aside."

"We'll need a pensieve, then," Harry mumbled.

"I'll contact Dumbledore," Shacklebolt said.

"Meet me on the beach," said Harry. "I'm suffocating in here."

He walked slowly to the bothy, his head swimming as at the end of a brutal workout. He spent a while longer on his knees in the water closet waiting to be sick, but it never came.

Shacklebolt was waiting for him, throwing stones into the surf. The pensieve sat next to him in the sand. Harry forced himself down the switchback one step at a time. Shacklebolt never turned, never acknowledged any awareness of his presence until Harry was just steps away. "Second thoughts?" he boomed.

"I think I have this down," he said quickly, "but I've only tried it once."

Shacklebolt raised the pensieve carefully. He turned it in his hands and appeared to read the tight rows of runes. "It's largely the same procedure for any sort of pensieve. I'm guessing you're familiar with that?"

Harry nodded and took out his wand. "Focus on the memory," he muttered, "focus..." As soon as he placed the tip of his wand at his temple, it began to shake violently. He felt something bubbling through him, not just in his head but all the way down to his toes. It wasn't until he set the tip of his wand into the pensieve's bowl that he saw the strands – still silver but with reddish cast. It didn't swirl as Harry expected; it boiled.

Shacklebolt carefully took up the pensieve again and continued to read. "Perhaps you should try this again. I don't think –"

"I'm not doing that again" Harry said flatly.

"There's more here than I believe you intended," Shacklebolt warned him.

“You were there,” Harry said; “Let’s just do this.”

“I can view it alone first, if you prefer,” Shacklebolt offered.

Harry shook his head. His voice wavered. “Now, or not at all,” he said.

Shacklebolt handed the pensieve to Harry. “Hold it firmly,” he ordered, and then he quickly entered the memory. Harry took a deep breath and joined him.

He was looking through his own eyes at a heavily cloaked Voldemort. He was bound, in the Grangers’ front room. He could feel everything that he’d felt the first time, but it was all much sharper than he recalled. There was no control – he couldn’t turn to look for Shacklebolt, and guessed that Shacklebolt was seeing exactly what he was seeing. It was an altogether different experience than he remembered from his prior glance into Dumbledore’s pensieve.

The front room smelled differently than he recalled. He didn’t listen closely to what Voldemort was telling him; he’d heard it the first time, after all. There were two smells, he decided. The first was what Harry figured evil would smell like, if it had a smell to it. The second was cologne, musky and rather too strong. The odour triggered something – enough for Harry to know that he’d smelled that cologne before. He couldn’t place it; perhaps it was Mr. Granger, he thought. The muffled sensation of Voldemort’s Cruciatus curse made him forget about the scent.

He saw Voldemort’s hands, which were a puzzle. First, he didn’t recall seeing them at the time. Second, and far more importantly, they didn’t belong to Voldemort. The skin on the hands was perfectly pink. They were clean, soft hands; hands unaccustomed to hard labour. They weren’t full or piggish, but there was something about their softness that brought to mind his Uncle Vernon.

Voldemort was guiding him down the hall, calling out to his servant Mulciber. He could see into the dining room from the corner of his eye, something else that he didn’t recall from the actual event. Mulciber planted his fist in Hermione’s stomach, and she doubled over in her chair; then he slapped her hard enough to make her straighten up.

Harry felt a surge of rage that didn't come from the pensieve, and then a far stronger surge that did. He felt himself drop into his own armchair. Lucius Malfoy slapped Mr. Granger, and Mr. Weasley tossed an insult at Malfoy.

Harry felt a hand press against his shoulder that he didn't remember from before. Shacklebolt's distant, watery voice seemed to flow from within, rather than coming through his ears:

Arthur Weasley just rose in my estimation.

Just then, Voldemort tore into Hermione's mind, and everything felt aflame. The hand moved to Harry's upper arm and gripped tightly.

Merlin! How could anyone do that? Monstrous!

The heat subsided. There was something about hearing Shacklebolt speak out, something that gave Harry the strength to keep watching. Voldemort remarked that Hermione could be a formidable ally in his plans. Harry gasped – he definitely didn't recall that. Shacklebolt gave a hazy harrumph.

Ridiculous – I hope she paid him no mind.

Hermione shouted back, and Shacklebolt grunted in assent. Then Voldemort gave his challenge for Harry to save the balance of the room by giving up Hermione. Mr. Weasley urged everyone to resist.

Bravo, Arthur! That was spot-on... absolutely right.

Voldemort had Wormtail seek the guarded secret within Hermione, and her screams filled Harry.

This is where I came in. Remember, Harry – it's only a memory...

Shacklebolt commended Harry for looking about the room and seeking a way out of the situation. Harry felt the ropes falling away. Hermione was shoved to her knees, and he was able to place the look on her face. At the time, he'd thought it was strength, and then maybe resolve. There was resolve there, to be sure. She'd prepared

herself to die, in order to protect him. Never again, he said to himself. I'll never let you do that for me again.

His last thoughts before popping across the dining room – ending with his decision to save her at everyone else's expense – replayed in his mind. He saw Ron from the corner of his eye. He wanted to look away, but all he could do was to watch what he'd already seen. In a trice, he was across the table and choking the life out of Wormtail.

The rest was a surreal blur. Harry tried his best to keep from becoming caught up in it, to focus on the little things. Malfoy dashed toward Hermione, and Harry wanted to reach out and throw him the length of the table – but it was over and done, and all he could do was watch. Tonks overturned the table for cover, and Voldemort cursed Dobby – something else Harry had missed or forgotten. Wormtail flew along the table and crashed into the far wall; then Harry lunged toward Mulciber, and the first punches flew. It was all dodgy – he moved like he was chasing a Snitch, while the Death Eaters barely budged. He thought of the punch that Hermione took, the one he hadn't seen the first time, and some small part of him was glad that Mulciber had been his first victim. There was a pulsing sound, like water sloshing in a drum, that grew louder and louder. The blood and the bits of bone and gristle stood in sharp relief courtesy of the pensieve, and Harry fought the urge to spew up. What he saw was incomprehensible, even in the face of five years of magic. He'd torn at the Death Eaters as though they were paper. He was betrayed by his thoughts played back to him – it had begun as defence, but it had quickly turned to retribution. Wormtail was gone, reduced to a rat. Malfoy somehow flowed into a duct and disappeared. Voldemort was gone from view, but he insisted that Harry embrace the violence and the rage. As soon as he heard that, Harry returned to himself.

What was that hissing sound? Do you recall hearing it before, Harry?

He stiffened at Shackbolt's questions. Voldemort must have spoken to me in Parseltongue, he figured. All he could see was a filmy haze, but this time there was no confusion about the source. Hermione saw him and flinched, and he called for her. It was a shout, a piercing and rage-filled shout – not at all the way he remembered it. He recalled sounding distant... and then he understood. I couldn't hear myself, he

thought, not until Dobby healed me. She folded against her father. He'd only seen the fear in her eyes at the time; now, he also saw pain and fatigue and shock and something horrible that he couldn't place. He looked down at the blood on his hands, then dropped to his knees and spewed up.

Harry felt Shacklebolt's hand on his back. They were no longer in the pensieve. Shacklebolt helped him up, and brushed sand from Harry's hands. "Harry! Can you hear me? Do you know where you are?"

"B-beach," Harry managed. The wind coming off the water was terribly cold, he thought.

"Good, that's good... stay focused! Look at my hand – count the fingers aloud," Shacklebolt ordered. He sounded so far away, even though Harry knew that he was within arm's reach.

"Four," Harry muttered.

"Try it again," Shacklebolt said urgently.

Harry managed a weak chuckle. "Four f-fingers... one thumb."

Shacklebolt let out a low, rumbling laugh. "You'll be all right," he said.

Then Harry felt something entirely unexpected. At first he thought it was from the breeze, but it was too solid, too insistent. Did he just ruffle my hair? It struck him as something that Sirius might have done, and he shivered.

"I have questions, Harry... so many questions," Shacklebolt said quietly, "but they'll keep. Back to the tower with you, for now... Mobilicorpus."

Harry tried to relax. The breeze was strong, but no longer cold. That didn't reassure him. For the first time in nearly four weeks, his scar was prickling.

\* \* \* \* \*

He woke to warmth and soft sheets. It took him a few moments to recognise the surroundings; he was in the master's chamber, in the tower. His shoes were on the floor, his wand was within easy reach, and it appeared as though his clothes had been transfigured into pyjamas. Light still streamed into the high windows, so he hadn't slept away the whole day – unless it had been a day and a half.

The door was open, and he could hear snatches of conversation from the corridor. It was easier to lie there with his eyes closed and listen, than to lift his head a second time.

"...no good at this. You should go in there. It's a chance to fix whatever it is that's broken – you should seize it," Shacklebolt muttered.

"He's resting comfortably and I'm glad for that, believe me, but... look, Kingsley, he's not my ward and I'm not his guardian. I'm the last person he'd want to see now. Better that you call Ted Tonks in the future, or even Dumbledore." Without a doubt, Remus Lupin was standing just outside Harry's door.

"You're practically his godfather," Shacklebolt insisted, "and I thought that Black's will did leave you as a guardian of sorts."

"Harry has a godfather," Lupin snapped. "I've nothing more than a financial responsibility, and I've signed that over to Ted. Things were said... both of us said hurtful things, horrible things. I can't give him what he needs, not right now."

"What he needs is a family," Shacklebolt whispered fiercely. "He needs people to pull together around him. He sees you as family, Lupin. To walk away from him is betrayal, pure and simple!"

There was a lengthy silence, before Lupin asked in a dangerous voice, "What did you see in that pensieve?"

"It was everything from the Grangers' house, from when he first saw Voldemort until the dust began to settle," Shacklebolt explained. "It wasn't just sight and sound, Lupin. He put everything into it... everything."

After a second long pause, Lupin said simply, "I see."

"If you truly saw, then you'd be in that room right now," Shacklebolt returned. "You took the same oath that I did, when you joined the Order. Tell me, how does that square with what you're going on about?"

"He doesn't need me. The Order doesn't need me," Lupin insisted. "Eighteen years, Kingsley... I lost eighteen years. If... if Harry could have James and Lily back... what do you think he'd give in return? What? Tell me."

"If this is about the woman and your daughter, it's not the same –" Shacklebolt began.

"You're right, it's not the same! James and Lily are gone forever, but somehow – through the grace of whatever god might be out there – somehow, I have Shona back. She knows what I am, and she doesn't care! You can't begin to imagine what that means. As for Heather... the fact that she even exists is almost too much to take in..." Lupin paused, and then added with a snarl, "I'll do my level best to see them protected from Voldemort. If that means pushing Harry away for the time being, then I'll have to live with that."

Shacklebolt descended into a near-whisper, and Harry had to still himself in order to hear. "Lower your voice, Lupin, unless you want him to wake. Harry's a smart boy. He doesn't want your daughter hurt. Look at what happened to Miss Granger – he can't even manage to write her a simple post, he's so tied in knots over it."

"Yes, look at what happened to Hermione – that's precisely my point," Lupin growled. Then there was a deep sigh. "There's no easy road for him, is there?"

"Go in there," Shacklebolt said.

Harry heard footsteps on stone, growing more distant. He waited to see Lupin's head peer through the doorway.



"I can't – if I do, I'll lose my resolve. I'm sorry," Lupin's voice echoed back, and the footsteps faded to nothingness.

Harry buried his face in the pillows, and breathed slowly and regularly. He brought his hands beneath his chest, to hide his fists. There was the scrape of chair legs on flagstone, followed by a settling creak. He stayed as still as he could.

"How much of that did you hear?" Shacklebolt asked.

Breathe easily, Harry thought. When you're asleep, it's just in and out, in and out.

"Hmm. Well, best that you're asleep. It would have been... very hard to hear that," Shacklebolt said.

Just hold still, and he'll go away, Harry told himself.

Shacklebolt continued to address Harry's back. "Do you know what worries me the most about you? There doesn't seem to be anything left to keep you from breaking. Last year, I figure it was Black and Miss Granger and the Weasleys. Black's gone, you've pushed away the Weasleys, and Miss Granger's fortunate to be alive. You've made amends with Dumbledore, but I'm not buying into that; your face still tightens when you hear his name. I don't know what passed between you and Lupin, but it must have been terribly ugly to provoke him so. What are you playing at? Do you want it to be just you and Voldemort, I wonder? I hope not, because that's hopelessly naïve. All you'll manage to arrange is you versus Voldemort and his full supply of minions."

Harry's fists tightened beneath him. He forced them open, and they clenched again. His head throbbed and his stomach churned. Open, closed, open, closed – he let them form a rhythm, to ward away the pain.

Shacklebolt's chair creaked loudly, and he went on, "I think you believe that you can push everyone away. It's sad to watch – you've poured so much energy into something so completely futile. Do you think that you can get rid of me so easily? I suspected that you were

the Defender of the Light before – the Chosen One – and now I know it. I'm sure you realise what that means; if you haven't already been briefed, I'm sure that you and your friends have pieced it together. I was in the right when I placed you before Dumbledore and the Order. Understand this ... I will die to defend your life if I must, and I will kill without the slightest hesitation to clear your path. You will succeed if I have to drag you to the bitter end and point your wand for you. I'm far from the only person who feels this way... despite your best efforts."

Chair legs dragged across flagstone a second time, and footsteps plodded toward the door. Harry kept breathing regularly, in and out, in and out. Shacklebolt stopped at the door. "By the way, Potter, that has to be the worst imitation of sleep I've ever seen. The elf says we'll be eating at six o'clock."

"I wanted to say something, before," Harry whispered.

Shacklebolt drew closer again. "I'm sorry?"

Harry cleared his throat. "I wanted to say something... when he was here. I couldn't do it."

"Why not?" Shacklebolt asked.

Harry took a long time to find an answer. "I won't beg," he said. "I won't put my head down and act grateful for every little morsel." His jaw tightened. "If he doesn't need me, then I don't need him."

Shacklebolt sat down on the edge of the bed. "You're old enough to know that life is rarely that simple."

Harry opened his mouth to speak, ready to rail against Lupin for giving up on him as soon as it was inconvenient, but stopped himself. Shacklebolt's face was drawn, and his eyes were too wide. "Are you all right?" Harry asked.

Shacklebolt pulled a wry smile. "You do know how to fill a pensieve."

"It was hard to see everything happening again," Harry said.

"Yes, I expect that it was," Shacklebolt agreed.

Harry closed his eyes and tried to push away thoughts of Lupin, but that left thoughts of Voldemort and of fate. "I wanted to give into it, you know," he admitted, eyes still shut. "I wanted to tear them apart."

"Understandable," Shacklebolt said. "You were motivated."

Harry's eyes snapped open. "You heard what I was... thinking...?"

Shacklebolt nodded, and resolutely fixed his eyes on the floor. "When I asked you to weigh whether Miss Granger was an asset or a liability to you... if I'd seen your memories before. I wouldn't have asked. Clearly she's much more than a school friend to you... and the Weasley boy, as well. No one should ever be asked to forsake his family."

"When I looked at her afterward, it just –" Harry tried to explain.

Shacklebolt stopped him. "Your emotions didn't match against the scene before you. Did you see things differently, this time?"

"Yes," Harry said quickly. "What do you think he did to her?"

Shacklebolt sighed. "I can't even begin to imagine."

Harry's scar twinged, and his fist clenched beneath him. "I can," he said.

Shacklebolt turned to face him. "You won't like this, but I think that you should share those memories with Dumbledore."

Harry jerked back, and the headboard rattled. "What?"

"Do you want him to recognise that you're no longer a schoolboy?" Shacklebolt asked. "If you want him to truly understand, then share this with him. Trust me when I say that it will answer questions and relieve doubts."

"What sort of doubts?" Harry shot back.

“All that power, Harry, and you regretted using it,” Shacklebolt explained. “Voldemort urged you on, and you stopped. You saved Miss Granger at some risk to the others in the room, but it wasn’t an easy choice for you to make. You’re not as out of control and undisciplined as some would make you out to be.”

“Er... thanks, I think,” Harry returned.

Shacklebolt stood. “I’ll leave you to your post, then.”

Harry managed a lopsided grin. “Are you sure? Don’t leave on my account.”

“Just put to paper whatever’s in your head,” Shacklebolt suggested; “Then cut down the result until it bleeds.” He hesitated, then added, “I’ve been around Aurors and Reversal Squad sorts who’ve... well... experienced sticky situations along the lines of Miss Granger –”

“Excuse me? ‘Sticky situations’?” Harry snapped.

Shacklebolt let out a long, slow breath, and sat down again. “It’s not easy for anyone to be assaulted, Harry, and mental assaults are much worse than the physical kind. I’ve known Aurors and others who’ve been mentally assaulted. It can be a difficult road back. I’ve seen people completely devastated by the experience, and of course there’s little support –”

“A difficult time when she returns...” Harry mumbled.

Shacklebolt stiffened. “It’s not fair, but it’s likely,” he agreed. “In fact, if it were to get out that Voldemort had done that to her, her professional and social prospects would be ruined.”

Harry’s eyes bulged. “What?”

“Think about what the Ministry and the press did to you last year,” Shacklebolt snapped. “As bad as it was, it would have been worse if you weren’t Harry Potter. You receive deference not granted to others, even when people have doubts. Miss Granger would not receive the

same treatment. The fact that she is Muggle-born would only make matters worse.” Shacklebolt’s expression intensified, and Harry slid backward in the bed despite himself. “I am ashamed to admit that... but it is the truth. I will speak to Dumbledore. I will not have you distracted, nor will I see Miss Granger persecuted over something that can be suppressed... what?”

“Er... you’re a bit scary right now,” Harry blurted out. “It’s a good sort of scary, I think, but... erm... yes, scary.”

Shacklebolt glared at him with wide eyes for a few moments, and then something seemed to drain out of him. “Based upon what I saw... I might say the same about you,” he said.

Harry swung his legs off the side of the bed. He summoned his wand, and returned his clothing to its normal state. “Finish our training for today, then?” he asked.

Shacklebolt shook his head. “Neither of us is in the proper state for it. I’ll return tomorrow. Take my advice – share this with Dumbledore.”

Harry stiffened, and said nothing. As soon as Shacklebolt stepped out the door, he called out, “Dobby?”

“Yes, Harry Potter?” Dobby squeaked from behind Harry’s head.

“Gah!” Harry hopped to his feet.

Shacklebolt stood in the doorway again, wand drawn and frowning. “Blasted elf,” he grunted.

“Dobby is so sorry, Harry Potter!” the house-elf moaned. He scanned the room frantically, and his eyes lit as he spotted the table lamp.

Harry darted into Dobby’s path. “How many times do I have to say it? No punishments! No knocking yourself senseless, no ironing your hands, no jumping under the Knight Bus, no hanging yourself by the feet over a pit of hungry demons...”

Dobby's shamed expression gave way to a pout. "Now Harry Potter is just playing with Dobby," he fumed, hands on hips. "No house-elf would provoke demons. Dobby would cut off his toes first."

"Dobby!" Harry snapped.

The house-elf shrugged. "Dobby is just talking about toes. Toes grow back."

Harry's finger still jabbed at Dobby, but words escaped him. He shook his head, and eventually said, "I just wanted to tell you that I won't be having dinner at six o'clock. I'd like some sandwiches and juice in the study, and then I don't want to be disturbed for the rest of the evening."

Shacklebolt indulged a faint smile from the doorway. "Yes, you've a post to finish, after all."

"I have business with Phineas," Harry said flatly.

Shacklebolt's brow furrowed. "Harry... that thing is no ordinary portrait; it knows too much. You take care with anything that it tells you."

Harry ignored him. "I'll be several hours; we have a lot of ground to cover. You're welcome to stay the night, if you like."

"I was hoping you'd say that," Shacklebolt said. "I've no reports of Death Eater activity in the area, but better to err on the side of safety for the present."

Dobby shuffled from one foot to the other. "Harry Potter... the... portrait will not like it if I should enter..."

Perfect, Harry thought. "Why don't you bring me the food now, then? I'll take it at the door."

A few minutes later, Harry was ensconced in the study with Phineas Nigellus and a plate of food that he didn't intend to eat. "Phineas, if I wanted to leave this room undetected —" he began.

“You would be served well by learning effective methods of stealth,” Phineas sniffed. “A schoolboy repertoire is inadequate for a person such as yourself.”

“I was hoping to slip out now,” Harry said anxiously.

Phineas shook his head gravely. “Children... always seeking the easy road, always wanting today what they ought not have for years hence...”

“Phineas...” Harry warned.

The portrait sighed. “Very well. Take out your wand... holding it in the proper position, Mister Potter – hand entirely on the lower third of the shaft and tip slightly elevated... and tap gently upon the following stones in precise order...” Harry went through the motions, which were reminiscent of entering Diagon Alley. The stones beneath Phineas reorganized themselves to reveal the landing of a narrow spiralling stair that descended into inky darkness.

“Will I be able to return here this way?” Harry asked.

“I believe that you are sufficiently intelligent to work out the return for yourself. The signet ring is the key, of course,” Phineas returned.

Harry peered down into the nothingness, quietly called out “Lumos”, and began his descent. “I take it that you wish the elf to believe that you are still present in the study?” Phineas called after him.

“Can you manage that?” Harry called back.

“If I cannot deceive a house-elf, then I suggest that you immerse me in pitch and light me afire,” Phineas sneered.

The stones above returned to their normal positions, and the only light that remained was the flickering glow from Harry’s wand. He followed the steps through what seemed like a hundred twists, until they exited into a rough-hewn tunnel of some kind. I just knew Phineas would have an escape plan, Harry thought.

There were sconces for magical torches every so often, but all were empty. Other than the general sense that he was walking slightly downhill, he had no sense of where he was. Phineas wouldn't have sent me into any sort of trap, he told himself. As he continued to walk, he watched the rock around him with much greater care.

He saw a faint glow ahead. The tunnel veered to the right, and the glow became much brighter. He could see hazy rocks, and he could hear the crashing of surf. He slowed his pace, and came to a stop. The tip of his wand pressed against something – it was as though the haze were solid. The surface seemed to give like a dense spider web at first, and he shuddered. Then it began to part, like a spongy curtain... like a veil, he thought. With a deep breath, he passed through it.

From the other side, it looked like a wall of rock. He pressed his wand against it. At first, it didn't yield. He saw a quick ruby-red flash, and the curtain gave against the pressure. It took him a few moments to recognise that the light had come from the red stone of the Black signet ring.

He was surrounded by craggy rocks on two sides, and the curtain on the third. There was sand beneath his feet, and he knew where he was. He enlarged the Bonnie, clambered onto the seat, rendered both he and the motorbike invisible, and drifted quietly out from behind the rocks and onto the beach. The tunnel emptied onto the far north end, not far from the northern stack. He made a wide turn southward over the sea, making sure to pass well beyond the tower before crossing the shoreline. A good ten miles down the carriageway, he landed off to one side and became visible again.

Harry turned the slip of paper from the Greek in his hands. "Teller Bros. Electronics Emporium, 26 Duck Lane, Westminster, W1F 9SR" was scrawled at the top in an untidy hand, along with a telephone number. Below that, Harry had added road directions obtained by calling the number – A40 to Wardour Street, and so forth. He stepped off the Bonnie, shrunk it to fit in his pocket, and breathed slowly until his mind cleared.



“Sorry, Dobby,” he muttered, and then popped.

\* \* \* \* \*

After crashing into a tree in the North York Moors and bouncing off a clock tower in Cambridge, a bruised and dazed Harry ended his series of pops in a littered alley within riding distance of his destination.

The neighbourhood wasn't the sparkling sort. Harry figured it for a place where the denizens of Grimmauld Place and the like would go to market. There were bars on many of the streetside windows. Despite that, the front doors of the tenements were wide open. The sidewalks were busy, busier than the streets, and quite a lot of people seemed to go in and out of the buildings.

Duck Lane was a dingy close, and Teller Brothers Electronics Emporium was wedged into the lowest floor of one of the nondescript tenements. Harry swung into a tight alleyway between two buildings, and disappeared just as he made the turn. He strolled back out of the alleyway with the Bonnie in his pocket and his glamour from Cabaret Moliere in place. The entrance to Teller Brothers was inside the landing of the tenement, which was plastered with a number of placards. It wasn't until he read 'busty young model, second floor' that he understood what they were for, and he promptly broke into a furious blush. He pushed against the door nervously, recognised that it needed to be pulled open – which only intensified his blush – and scurried into the shop.

The shop was crammed to the ceiling with all manner of cases and crates and widgets that Harry had never seen before and couldn't identify. A broad-shouldered, broad-faced man with a thick mop of sandy hair was hefting a box of something or another. The opening door had rung a clanging bell of some kind, but the man seemed to barely take it in. “Afternoon, guv. The ladies are up the stairs,” he grunted.

“Erm... I saw the signs... uh... figured that out, thanks,” Harry spluttered. “I'm looking for Teller, actually.”

The man set down the large box as though it were a trifle. "I'm Teller," he announced. "We're closing in a few, so what would you be wanting?"

Harry looked at him for a moment, puzzled. "You... er... the thing is, you don't sound like... it's just that I called... you know, on the telephone..."

"Ah. You're looking for Teller," the man said knowingly. He picked up the box again, set it on the counter at the back of the shop, and bellowed, "Teller! There's a bloke out front looking for you."

Shuttered half-doors behind the counter banged open. "Cripes! No need to shout!" The man who ploughed through the doors was taller and much thinner than the first Teller, but had the same sandy hair. He peered at Harry. "Yeah, I'm Teller. What do you want?"

Harry reeled, but managed to respond, "I called for directions, last night. Burke Preston said that I —"

The second Teller paled slightly. "Good Gawd, man! You didn't throw out that bone on the phone, did you? Well... I certainly can't help you. You need to see Teller. Follow me." He slammed back through the half-doors without waiting to see if Harry would in fact follow.

Harry let his wand slip down into his fingertips, and trailed the second Teller at a respectable distance. They wound through a labyrinthine backroom, to a retractable metal ladder that led to a hatch in the high ceiling. Teller jumped up, grasped the lowest rung, and brought the ladder to earth.

"You're joking," Harry said flatly.

Teller shrugged. "Teller's up there."

Harry crossed his arms. "I'm not climbing head first into an unfamiliar room. Teller will be down here, or I'll be leaving." He worked his jaw for a moment, and impetuously added, "Burke Preston will not be pleased."

A flicker of something played across the second Teller's face, and then he nodded and ascended the ladder. The man who followed him back down was young, much younger than the other two Tellers. He had the telltale sandy hair, but was short and wiry and had sharp features. He stood there facing Harry for several long moments, hands on hips, and then said to the second Teller without looking away, "Everything's in hand. Leave us, would you?"

As soon as they were alone, Teller put his hands palms out. "Take my wands, both of them," he said.

"Accio wands," Harry whispered. As soon as he pocketed the two wands that flew at him, he added, "Accio potions... accio talismans... accio knives." Nothing else was forthcoming.

Teller flashed an impish grin. "You need to learn a right proper Pickpocketing Charm, friend."

"You gave those up too easily," Harry said warily.

Teller nodded appreciately. "Wards upon wards in here. We're both in check, I think. Everything you're here for is up the ladder. I'll go first. Any funny business, and I figure it's bad for my health – even without spells. Good enough for you?"

Harry stopped and waved one of his hands, looking for any of the sensations he'd come to associate with wards. He tried to take on Shacklebolt's easy cadence, and hoped his voice wouldn't crack. "Either you have amazing wards, or you're bluffing," he said. "Start climbing."

His wand was in full view now, and Teller stood there, staring at it. "That's... um... a distinctive wand you've got there," Teller said haltingly. "Holly, is it? Not many of those around."

"Are we doing this, or not?" Harry snapped.

"Right... right... up the ladder, then," Teller muttered, and scrambled up the rungs, Harry close on his heels.

The room above was ringed with open metal racks, crammed with all manner of equipment. There were cords everywhere – thick black ones, slender white ones, loose ones, connected ones. In the centre of the room, near the hatch, sat a long work table with three stools.

Harry gave a slight shudder – a familiar one. “There’s a magic dampening ward in here, isn’t there?” he asked.

Teller’s eyebrows shot up. “You... you’d better be on the up and up,” he spluttered.

“How would you know?” Harry asked. “I mean, you don’t know who I am.”

“I know Preston sent you,” Teller answered. “You’re carrying a piece of paper, right? It has the address and particulars on it.”

Harry quickly took out the piece of paper. “What did you do to it?”

Teller waved his hands defensively. “Nothing to fret about! Just a very narrow Recognition Charm... I’m rather good at those.”

Harry dropped the paper onto the worktable as though it were on fire. “Let’s... er... let’s just get on with this, right?”

Teller sat on one of the stools. Harry noticed that he was careful to keep his hands in view. “Preston said you were to get the best, and nothing but the best. I don’t know who you are... er... not really... and I really don’t want to know. Why don’t I get you set up, so you can go about your business, I can get my wands back, Preston can pay me, and we can all be happy?”

Harry nodded. “I guess I’m here for a mobile telephone and a computer.”

Teller cracked his knuckles. “Ah, not just any mobile... not just any computer... these, friend, are works of art.”

Harry shrugged. “As long as they work.”

Teller's eyes narrowed. "As long as they... hey! Are you trying to insult my craftsmanship?" He hopped off the stool, and rummaged through one of the open shelves until he found a black case the size of a small shoe. "This baby will work everywhere in England that lies within reach of a tower. No worries about magical interference. It'll stand up to any spell... well, I've never tested it with an Unforgivable, of course." He waved his hand across the case. "Dragon hide, just to be safe." Inside the case was a perfectly normal looking mobile telephone – the same model as Harry had used at Cabaret Moliere. "I have a charger and a dozen extra batteries around here... somewhere... if there's any part that'll fail over a burst of magic, it'll be the battery..." He emerged from a different shelf triumphant, and sat a box before Harry with a flourish.

"It won't work at Hogwarts," Harry said.

Teller looked almost angry for a moment. "I wouldn't know about that," he said. The anger seemed to pass. "They work in Hogsmeade, I can tell you. Preston's boss... I figure you know who that is, right?... he had a tower placed a few miles to the south."

Harry brightened. "Really? That'll be useful."

Teller stopped, studied Harry for a few moments, then gave a small shake of the head, and returned to the shelves. He brought a black briefcase to the table. "Now, this... well, it was just cool before, but I've made it brilliant if I do say so." He opened the case, and withdrew a black machine that opened like a clamshell. "This is an Apple PowerBook Duo 2300c... more or less. I've squeezed in as much RAM as it will hold, and set you up with the largest hard drive Apple makes. It's running OS 7.5, and you'll want it upgraded to OS 8 as soon as that reaches market..." His impish grin returned. "You haven't the faintest idea what I've just said, have you?"

"Not a word, no," Harry admitted.

Teller laughed. "Well... long night ahead, then."

It wasn't quite as long as all that. Harry was motivated, and the basics of operating the mobile and the computer weren't difficult; they were

simply complicated. He approached the whole thing like he was mastering the intricacies of brewing a potion, and that seemed to work for him. After less than two hours, Teller announced that he was satisfied Harry wouldn't destroy either machine through simple use. Harry shook Teller's hand, and began to pack up the PowerBook under his watchful eye.

Teller asked quietly and casually, "I can't help but ask, friend, so here it is. Have you really... you know... seen him?"

Harry fought to remain calm. He continued to pack the various cords into the case, even as he took in the room with his eyes. "Him? Who is 'him? I'm not sure what you mean," he said evenly.

"Him," Teller repeated, "the one whose name I'm not about to say aloud."

"I'm going to have to Obliviate you – you know that, right?" Harry said.

Teller nodded uneasily. "It wouldn't be the first, probably won't be the last."

Harry carefully fitted the computer into the soft padding. "Yeah, I've seen him," he said.

Teller looked at Harry with haunted eyes. Harry could only recall seeing eyes like that on one other person, and he nearly knocked the computer case off the table. "The Muggle world's a good place to hide," Teller said. "His kind, they... they screech on and on about mudbloods and Muggles and purity and that rot. They don't understand the regular world, they... they think it's evil, or beneath 'em, or something. Maybe you can use that."

"How do you know that?" Harry whispered. His wand was in his hand, dampening wards or not.

Teller slowly reached up, and stretched the neck of his T-shirt downward. There were runes tattooed on his chest, familiar ones, though not so many as Sirius had. "I was seventeen. I was tweaking Muggle electronics – more or less what I'm doing for you. I wasn't

Muggle baiting, I wasn't even selling nothin'. We'll make an example of you, they said, make sure none of your friends get any ideas. Four months, I spent there... may as well have been four hundred years. I learned about fear there..." He trailed off, and let his shirt snap back up. "The Ministry is shite, but the Death Eaters and... you know..." He twirled his index finger in a lazy circle next to his temple. "Crazy, the lot."

"How did you fall into this, then?" Harry asked. "Seems a bit, I don't know... risky?"

Teller laughed loudly. "Sorry... you're taking me to task about risk? You? Serious case of the pot calling the cauldron black, right?"

Harry smiled faintly, though still very much on guard. "Fair enough."

"The Ministry could grind me like a flobberworm – already has. Keith MacLeish can walk into Fudge's office with a ruddy mobile, and no one will say a word. I'm an employee. He and Preston say I'm safe, and I believe them," Teller explained.

"You've met MacLeish, then?" Harry asked.

Teller nodded enthusiastically. "He's a great man, MacLeish. He believes in second chances, and he's good to you if you're good to him. People... they just don't see that about him."

Harry thought for a moment, and then closed the computer case. "Guess we should go downstairs for this, with the wards and all?"

"Shop's closed," Teller said. "You can do it behind the counter." They descended the ladder quickly and silently, and Teller crouched down just past the half-doors.

Harry considered his options. "I may need your help again," he said. "How do you feel about that?"

"I'll do what I can," Teller offered. "I suppose you'll need all the help you can get before it's all over, eh?"

Harry extended his right hand and shook Teller's hand. "My name is James Black. Feel free to call me Jim, if you like. I'm just a friend of Preston's. Obliviate." He made a silent entreaty to Merlin, in hopes that he had cast the spell properly.

Teller's eyes glazed for an instant, before he shook his head roughly. "Wha...?"

Harry pulled him to his feet. "Are you all right?"

"Sure, I'm... yes, I'm all right," Teller decided. "If you need anything else, Mr. Black... uh... sorry... Jim, be sure to call or stop in during shop hours."

Harry suppressed the impulse to smile widely. "I'm grateful, Teller." He held up the computer case, and succumbed to the impulse. "It's a real work of art," he added. Then he rushed onward, hoping to squeeze in another stop before returning to the tower.

\* \* \* \* \*

By the time Harry made it to Ottery St. Catchpole, after nearly embedding himself in a lorrie at Marsdon and tipping two cows outside of Bristol, the sun was reduced to an orange glimmer in the western sky. He missed the entry to the Weasley's property twice, and went down the wrong drive once, before he was certain that he was riding between the right sort of hedgerows.

The Burrow was gone. The family Quidditch pitch was still marked, and Mr. Weasley's shed still stood – albeit precariously – but the house itself was reduced to three irregular piles of rubble. A familiar pair of shabby two-man tents were pitched behind the shed. A familiar pair of red-haired men stood atop one of the piles. Harry let the Bonnie drop to the ground. He sat there, and watched, and slowly began to shake.

Bill Weasley triumphantly raised something oblong. "Mum!" he shouted. "Mum, come quickly!"



Mrs. Weasley slowly clambered from one of the tents. “What did you find? What? What is it?”

Bill bounded down from the rubble in three hops. “It’s the clock, Mum! We found it... I told you it would hold up...” The excitement drained from his voice as she drew closer.

“It’s not working,” Mrs. Weasley sniffed.

Mr. Weasley clambered down more cautiously. “But it’s whole, Molly – it’s intact. I’m sure we can make it right.”

“It’s not working,” she repeated. “Look.”

Bill frowned. “What? You and Dad are ‘at home’... Ginny and Ron and me, we’re all ‘at home’... Fred and George are ‘at work’... Charlie looks to be ‘in danger’, but that’s more or less a constant, right?”

“It says that Harry is ‘at home’,” Mrs. Weasley said, “and that Hermione is ‘in transit’. It’s not working... it’s not right... n-nothing is right...”

“It’ll just take time,” Mr. Weasley said.

Harry couldn’t move; he could barely breathe. He wanted to know why Ron, Ginny and Bill had come to St. Ebb at all, given the state of things; he wanted to know why Ron hadn’t told him just how bad things really were, or Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, or Dumbledore, or someone. He couldn’t keep his hands from shaking anymore. “I did this,” he groaned.

He didn’t realise he’d said it aloud, until Bill’s head whipped around. “Merlin’s ghost!” Bill shouted. “Harry? Is that you?”

Harry tried to move the motorbike, or render it invisible, or something – anything at all. His hands wouldn’t obey. All he could do was sit there and await an onslaught of Weasleys.

Improbably, Mrs. Weasley arrived first. Harry steadied himself for one of her crushing hugs, and was not disappointed. He waited for her to tear into him for riding unaccompanied across the country, or for failing to first send a post, or for being late for dinner, or whatever might have been on her mind. It never came. She just held onto him and wept, and he didn't try to push away. Mr. Weasley's hand came to rest on Harry's shoulder, which instantly reminded Harry of his outburst in the tower.

"Told you the clock would hold up, Mum," Bill said in a strained voice.

"I'm... I'm on your clock," Harry choked out.

Mrs. Weasley drew back hesitantly. "I hope you don't mind, Harry," she said. "It just seemed right for both you and Hermione to be there, with us."

"Of course I don't mind," Harry insisted. He looked at the hand with his face on it, set to 'at home'. The picture of him looked to be a year old or more. "Maybe we could find a newer photograph?"

Mrs. Weasley began, "I'd like that..." Her smile quickly faded away. "Harry! What's happened to you?" Mr. Weasley peered at Harry, and his eyebrows rose.

Bill kept smiling. "It's the same glamour as you used the other night, isn't it?"

"Glamour?" Harry asked absently. "Oh! The glamour!" He took out his wand, and quickly cancelled the spell.

Mrs. Weasley relaxed. "That's more like it! I'm not sure about that hair – Bill, what are you smirking at? – but at least you look like yourself. You can look in your twenties when you reach your twenties."

"Bloody hell! How did you get here?" Ron shouted from the vicinity of the tents.

"Ronald! Language!" Mrs. Weasley snapped.

“I walked, mate – how else?” Harry smirked.

He felt another crush from behind, as Ginny piled into him. “Merlin, it’s good to see you,” she said. “Are you all right?”

“Breathe... need to breathe...” Harry moaned.

“Likely story,” Ginny shot back. “I mean it, Harry... are you all right?”

Harry sat upright, and Ginny let him go. He swung his leg over the Bonnie, took off the saddlebags, and reduced the bike, before he looked Ginny squarely in the eye. “No,” he said. “I doubt any of us are all right. I’m glad to be here, though.”

Mr. Weasley took Harry’s hand and clasped it tightly. “That’s good enough,” he said, and pulled Harry into the sort of embrace he’d seen between fathers and sons. When he let go, his eyes turned to the rubble. “It’s a sight, isn’t it?”

Harry’s first impulse was to apologise for everything – for the loss of the Weasley’s home, for the attack at the Grangers’, for sending everyone packing from the Black tower. He resisted that, and held himself in check by staring at the remains of the Burrow. When he felt in control, he turned to the elder Weasleys and asked, “What can I do?”

Mrs. Weasley looked to the burnt orange sky. “We’re finished for the day, Harry. You must be knackered from such a long ride, anyway.”

“It’s... been a long day, yes,” Harry said carefully.

Mrs. Weasley was practically beaming. “Let’s go inside, shall we?” It looked to be the same three-room flat that the Weasleys had borrowed for the Quidditch World Cup two years prior, although the crochet covers were absent and the furniture was more closely matched than he recalled.

The five Weasleys crowded around the kitchen table intended for four, but left a space for Harry. They chatted for a while about nothing in

particular; he didn't bring up the events at the Grangers', and they didn't bring up the last day at the tower.

"Why is it still down?" Harry asked abruptly. "I mean, I don't know anything about how wizards actually build a house, but it has been almost a month."

Bill let his forehead drop to the tabletop, and gently rapped it against the wood. Mr. Weasley let out a snort, and punched Bill's upper arm.

"Nothing will stay up, mate," Ron said. "Dad and Bill haven't been able to make two planks hold together."

"I'm completely baffled," Bill admitted. "Dumbledore's had some Unspeakables and other expert sorts take a look. Even Odd Lovegood's tramped around the place."

"If he claims that he's never seen anything like it, then you know it's time to fret," Mr. Weasley said, and Harry suspected that he was only half-joking.

Harry's eyes widened. "You surely can't stay out here in these? I mean, they're nice and all, but what about water, or the wintertime, or...?"

"If we don't soon find a reason for what's happening here, then we'll have to let rooms for the winter," Mrs. Weasley sighed. "It's been many a year since we've been boarders, but we'll manage. There are always vacancies along Diagon Alley."

"I know what the Burrow meant... er... means. Means!" Harry said. "I'm so sorry this happened."

Ginny reached out and grasped his hand. "It's not your fault," she said.

"I know it's not," Harry agreed. Ginny let go his hand with a start. "That doesn't mean I can't be sorry it's happened," he added.

Mrs. Weasley sagged in her chair. "Thank you, Harry," she whispered.

Harry broke the silence several minutes later. "Would you mind if I took a walk? I'd just like to move around a bit."

Mrs. Weasley looked uneasy. "It's dark now. There's no way to be sure —"

"I'll go with him," Ron offered.

She harrumphed, "You? You're more of a danger than he is!" but joined in the laughter immediately.

Harry made a show of taking out his wand. "We won't be long. Bill can watch from the flap, right?" Bill nodded, and Harry didn't await any further sort of permission.

A broad scorched area matched the footprint of the house that once stood there; the piles were situated around it. The ground felt wrong somehow, almost tainted. Harry couldn't think of another way to describe the sensation; it wasn't like a ward or any other kind of spell that he could recall.

"They aren't going to solve this, are they?" Ron asked.

Harry shrugged weakly. "If Dumbledore doesn't know what happened, and the Unspeakables don't know what happened, then who would?"

"The wankers responsible for it, do you suppose?" Ron snapped. He sighed, and added quietly, "At least we have some money. We could have lost everything, with no way to replace it."

"I'd never have let that happen," Harry said. "I'd never have left you in the lurch."

Ron's jaw tightened, but he said, "I'm not going to pick a fight over money, Harry. I'm tired of picking fights, you know?"

Harry paced around the roughly stacked debris. Very little of the remains were recognisable. He thought that he spotted part of Ron's Chudley Cannons poster. "What do you think your parents would say

if I gave them the tower, you know, for as long as they want to use it?" he asked quietly.

Ron's jaw dropped, and he blurted out, "Are you serious?"

Harry laughed. "No, but I don't think he'd mind."

Ron winced. "All right, I deserved that one."

"I do mean it, though," Harry said. "I mean, what am I going to do with the place? It's bloody enormous, and it'll need someone to look after it over the winter anyway, and..."

Ron snorted. "You don't have to sell me on the idea. My mum... three weeks in a tent is a long time, I figure. She might actually go for it."

"And your dad?" Harry asked.

"He'd jump at it, I think – well, as much as he jumps at anything," Ron decided.

Harry nodded. "I'm going to make the offer, then."

Ron stopped him. "Why? I mean, you were dead set on getting everyone to leave before."

"Someone reminded me yesterday that family is important. For me, that means all of you," Harry returned.

Ron laughed a bit too loudly. "You're listening to people now? What's next, then – sending letters to Auntie Agony?"

Harry snorted. "I've had my fill of advice, thank you very much."

"Maybe she knows how to snuff V-Voldemort, eh?" Ron teased.  
"Dear Auntie Agony: I have this persistent problem with a Dark Lord. Everywhere I go, he seems to follow. He just won't take 'no' for an answer. What should I do?" Signed... what, Harry in Hades?"

Harry snorted again, then began to laugh. "She'd probably have me send him an assortment from Honeydukes," he managed. They laughed a while longer, and then fell into a companionable silence as they walked the length of the Quidditch pitch.

Ron stopped at the far end of the pitch, and gazed at the waning moon. "The clock says Hermione's 'in transit'," he said. "That must be good news, right?"

"I hope so," Harry said glumly.

"What, you think it's not good news?" Ron asked quickly.

Harry stammered, "No, no, it's just... look, after everyone left, I was getting all these posts, more than I knew how to handle... so I started banishing all of them... I didn't bother to check..."

Ron's eyes widened. "She sent you a post?"

Harry nodded.

"And you banished it?" Ron's eyes were positively bulging.

Harry buried his face in his hands, and nodded again. "I've been trying to write a post all day... you know, a reply, an apology, whatever. I suppose it's too late now."

"It might be," Ron said. "I suppose 'in transit' could mean a few different things. I'd get it written and get it sent, mate. You don't want to face the wrath of Hermione, right? I mean... I said I'd watch your back, but..."

Harry shoved him. "Prat."

Ron held up his hands in surrender. "What? She's scary."

"She's not scary," Harry said. "I just hope she's all right."

Ron nodded. "She'll be all right. She's a strong one... and scary. Definitely scary."

Harry began to trudge toward the tents. "Ron, I don't have a schedule from Dumbledore yet. It's a good bet I won't be in classes with you, and I don't know which courses you've subscribed, but... watch out for her, right?"

"I can do that," Ron said, " but who's going to watch out for you, mate?"

Harry shrugged. "Does it matter?"

Ron stepped into his path. "It matters to me, and you know it matters to her."

"Does it?" Harry asked.

"Damn straight," Ron snapped. "We watch out for each other, then, like always." He moved out of Harry's way. "Right, then. I want to watch you try and give a castle to Mum and Dad. This should be cracking."

"It's a tower house," Harry corrected him.

"Yeah, whatever," Ron said. "Cracking, either way."

- - - - -

Hermione,

I'd ask how you are, except that would probably be the dumbest question I've ever asked. That's saying something, coming from me.

It's been a very eventful month. I've spent most of it in the place where I was heading when we last saw each other. I've met some interesting people, and lost some other people from my life. There were a few serious upsets this month. During the last, I started banishing my posts so I wouldn't be buried in owls. I found out later that I banished a post from you, and I didn't mean to do that. Most of what I wanted to tell you is best said in person, anyway.



I've been worried about you ever since I found out what happened. I hope that you're feeling better.

Dumbledore and I haven't gotten on very well since you left, but he's made arrangements for my schooling beginning in a few days and I've accepted. I won't be seeing as much of you or Ron as I'd like, but I'll do my best. I'll see you the first week of September, if not before.

Love, from

Harry

- - - - -

Harry carefully sealed the envelope and secured it to Hedwig, who disappeared into the darkness. He picked up the smaller dragon hide case, unzipped it, and turned the mobile telephone in his hands. It was a rather crisp night – clearly the summer was coming to an end. He climbed out the garret window, and scrambled onto the roof. Shacklebolt called out something loudly that he couldn't quite make out, but then waved in recognition. He waved back, then sat with his back against a crenellation and watched the stars for a while.

He turned the mobile again, and touched a number. The display lit up in the darkness. He didn't need the parchment, because Teller had stored the number that Harry wanted inside the telephone. All he had to do was press the number 9, and then the little button marked 'send'. If he pushed that button, he knew that he'd be acting against the advice of nearly everyone in his life. When he pushed it, there was an audible beep. He held the mobile to his hear. There was ringing, then a clicking sound, and then a voice.

Harry's throat was impossibly dry. "Heather? It's Harry. Are you alone?"

Review this Story/Chapter